
THE
**STATE
OF THE
ART**



IAIN M. BANKS

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THE STATE OF THE ART

There are few meaningful limits that would seem to apply to the work of Iain M. Banks. His first novel, *The Wasp Factory*, drew both praise and opprobrium for its controversial imagery and pointed symbolism. It went on to become a modern classic of horror as well as a widely revered work of mainstream literature, selling briskly by any measure. With every succeeding book, he has continued to raise eyebrows and stimulate readers worldwide.

With the 1987 appearance of *Consider Phlebas*, his first science fiction novel of "The Culture," he single-handedly redefined the possibilities of advanced technology and the colonization of space (if not by Earth, then at least by a distant quasi-human civilization). Building on the concepts of a functioning utopia and a fully-realized society based on unprecedented individual freedom, he has added to this vision with a second novel, *The Player of Games*, and now again with *The State of the Art*.

This addition to the growing body of Culture lore takes the Earth of 1977 for its primary focus, adding definition and scale to the previous works by using the familiar world as contrast. And Banks is not content to restrict his attention to the imaginary and hypothetical — his observations of Earth and most especially of Western culture in the late twentieth century are every bit as fascinating as the wildest of the sf elements he has concocted for The Culture.

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**MARK V. ZIESING
WILLIMANTIC, CONNECTICUT
1989**

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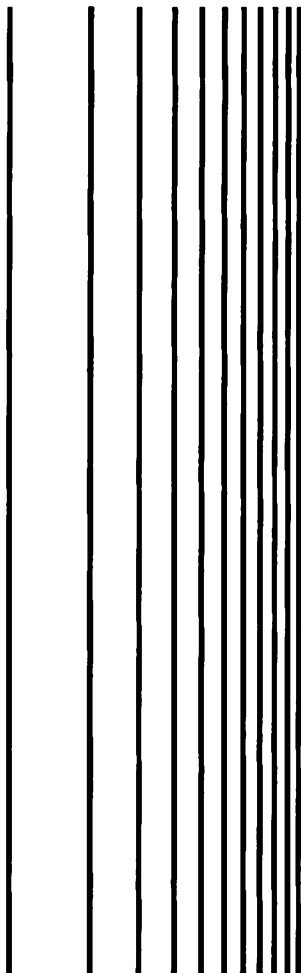
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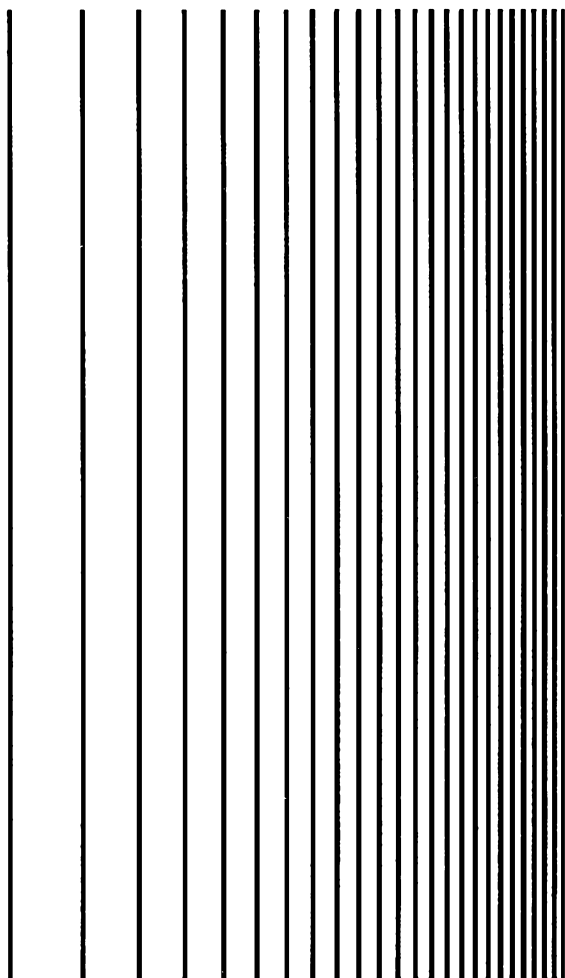
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1: Excuses And Accusations

Parharengyisa	Rasd-Codurersa
Listach	Diziet
Ja'andeesih	Embless
Petrain	Sma
dam Kotosklo	da' Marenhide

(location as name)	(c/o SC)
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2.288-93

Dear Mr Petrain

I do hope you will accept my apologies for keeping you waiting so long. Included herewith — at last! — is the information you asked me for all that time ago. My personal well-being, after which you so kindly enquired, is all I could hope for. As you will probably have been told, and doubtless observed from my location (or rather lack of it) above, I am no longer in *Contact ordinaire*, and my position in Special Circumstances is such that I occasionally have to leave my present address for considerable periods of time, often with only a few hours notice during which to attend personally to any outstanding business. Apart from these sporadic jaunts, my life is one of lazy luxury on a sophisticated stage three-four (uncontacted) where I enjoy all the benefits of an interestingly, if not exotically, foreign planet sufficiently developed to possess a reasonably civilised demeanour without suffering overmuch the global sameness which so often accompanies such progress.

A pleasant life, then, and when I am called away it usually feels more like a holiday than an unwelcome interruption. In fact, the only grit in

the eye is a rather self-important Offensive-model drone whose exaggerated concern for my physical safety, if not my peace of mind, frequently becomes more exasperating than it is comforting (my theory is that SC finds drones whose robust pugnacity has led them to some overly-violent act in the past and then tells these pathological devices to guard their human Special Circumstancer successfully, or be componented. But that is by the bye).

Anyway, what with the remoteness of my habitation and the fact I've been off-planet for the past hundred days or so (with drone, of course), and the delay while I consulted my notes and tried to dig from my memory what scraps of conversation and 'atmosphere' I could, and then fretting over the best way to present the resulting data ... well, all this has taken rather a long time, and to be honest the sedate mode of my present life has not helped me to be as brisk as I would have liked in the execution of this task.

I am glad to hear that you are only one of many scholars specialising in Earth; I always did think the place well worth studying, and perhaps even learning from. Thankfully, then, you will have all the information that could possibly qualify as background, and I apologise in advance if anything I include doubles on this; but while I have stuck as strictly as memory (machine and human) will allow to what actually happened those hundred and fifteen years ago, I have nevertheless tried to make the presentation of the following events and impressions as general and self-contained as possible, believing this to be the best way of attempting to conform with your request to describe what it really felt like to be there at the time. I trust this combination of fact and sensation does not unduly affect the utility of either when you come to process the result in

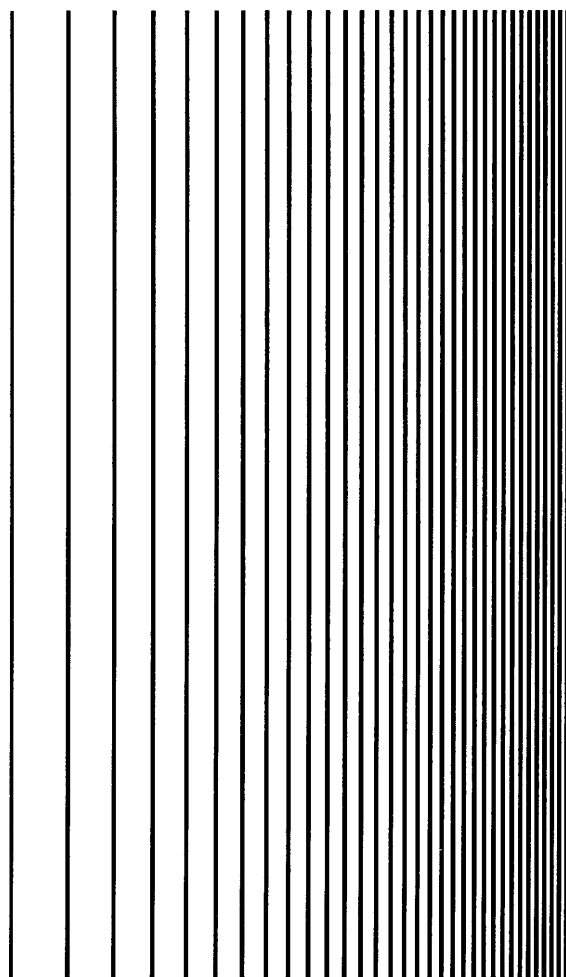
the course of your studies, but in the event that it does, and also if you have any other questions about Earth at that time which you think I might be able to help answer, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me; I am only too happy to shed what light I can on a place that affected everyone who was there both profoundly and — in the main, I suspect — permanently.

What follows, then, is as much as I and my bank can remember. The conversations I have had to reconstruct, as a rule; I did not then practise full-record, it being a minor piece of the ship's (frankly tediously) eccentric etiquette not to 'over-observe' (its words) life on board. Some dialogue, mostly on-planet, was recorded, however, and I have placed these sections between the following two symbols: < >. They have undergone a degree of tidying up — removing the usual 'umms' and 'ahs' and so on — but the original recordings are available to you from my bank without further authorization, should you feel you require them. For the sake of brevity I have reduced all Full Names to one or two parts, and done my best to anglicise them. All the times and dates are Earth-relative / local (Christian calendar).

Incidentally, I was most pleased to receive your news about the *Arbitrary* and its escapades over these last few decades; I confess to having been rather out of touch recently, and became quite nostalgic on hearing again of that misfit machine.

But back to Earth, and back all those years ago, and by the way my English has suffered over the past century of neglect; the drone is translating all this, and any mistakes are bound to be its.

Diziet Sma



2: Stranger Here Myself

2.1: Well I Was In The Neighborhood

By the spring of the year 1977 AD, the General Contact Unit *Arbitrary* had been stationed above the planet Earth for the best part of six months. The ship, of the Escarpment class, middle series, had arrived during the previous November after clipping the edge of the planet's expanding electro-magnetic emission shell while on what it claimed was a random search. How random the search pattern really was I don't know; the ship might well have had some information it wasn't telling us about, some scrap of rumour half remembered from somebody's long-discredited archives, multitudinously translated and re-transmitted, vague and uncertain after all that time and movement and change; just a mention that there was an intelligent human-ish species there, or at least the beginnings of one, or the possibility of one ... You could ask the ship itself about this easily enough, but getting an answer might be another matter (you know what GCUs are like).

Anyway, there we were over an almost classic sophisticated stage three perfect enough to have come right out of the book, from a footnote if not a main chapter. I think everybody, including the ship, was delighted. We all knew the chances of stumbling across something like Earth were remote, even looking in the most likely places (which we weren't, officially), yet all we had to do was switch on the nearest screen or our own terminals and see it hanging there, in real space, less than a micro-second away, shining blue and white (or black velvet scattered with light motes), its wide, innocent face ever changing. I remember staring at it for hours at a time on occasion, watching the weather patterns' slow swirl if we were stationary relative to it, or gazing at its rolling curve of water, cloud and land mass if we were moving. It looked at once serene and

warm, implacable and vulnerable. The contradictory nature of these impressions worried me for reasons I could not fully articulate, and contributed to a vague feeling of apprehension I already had that somehow the place was a little too close to some perfection, slightly too textbookish for its own good.

It needed thinking about, of course. Even while the *Arbitrary* was still turning and decelerating, and then running through the old radio waves on its way to their source it was both pondering itself and signalling the General Systems Vehicle *Bad For Business*, which was tramping a thousand years core-ward, and which we had left after a rest and refit only a year before. What else the *Bad* might have contacted to help it mull over the problem is probably on record somewhere, but I haven't considered it important enough to search out. While the *Arbitrary* described graceful power-orbits around Earth and the great Minds were considering whether to contact or not, most of us in the *Arbitrary* were in a frenzy of preparation.

For the first few months of its stay the ship acted like a gigantic sponge, soaking up every scrap, every bit of information it could find anywhere on the planet, scouring tape and card and file and disc and fiche and film and tablet and page and scroll, recording and filming and photographing, measuring and charting and mapping, sorting and collating and analysing.

A fraction of this avalanche of data (it felt like a lot but it was actually pifflingly small, the ship assured us) was stuffed into the heads of those of us sufficiently close in physique to pass for human on Earth, after a little alteration (I got a couple of extra toes, a joint removed from each finger and a rather generalised ear, nose and cheekbone job. The ship insisted on teaching me to walk differently as well), and so by the start of '77 I was fluent in German and English and probably knew more about the history and

current affairs of the place than the vast majority of its inhabitants.

I knew Dervley Linter moderately well, but then one knows everybody on a ship of only three hundred people. He had been on the *Bad For Business* at the same time as I, but we had only met after we both joined the *Arbitrary*. Both of us had been in Contact for about half the standard stretch, so neither of us were exactly novices. This, to me, makes his subsequent course of action doubly mystifying.

I was based in London for January and February, spending the time tramping through museums (seeing exhibits the ship already had perfect 4D holos of, and not seeing the crated artifacts there wasn't room to show which were stored in basements or somewhere else entirely, which the ship *also* had perfect holos of), going to movies (which the ship of course had copies of compiled from the very best prints), and — more relevantly, perhaps — attending concerts, the theater, sports and every sort and type of gathering and meeting the ship could discover. I spent quite a lot of time just walking around and looking, getting people talking. All very dutiful, but not always as easy or stress-free as it sounds; the bizarre sexual *mores* of the locals could make it surprisingly awkward for a woman to simply go up and start talking to a man. I suspect if I hadn't been a good ten centimetres taller than the average male I'd have had more trouble than I did.

My other problem was the ship itself. It was always trying to get me to visit as many places as possible, do as much as I could, see all the people I was able to; look at this, listen to that, meet her, talk to him, watch that, wear this ... it wasn't so much that we wanted to do different things — the ship rarely tried to get me to do anything I wouldn't want to do — simply that the thing wanted me to be doing something *all the time*. I was its envoy to the city, its one human

tendrils, a root through which it sucked with all its might, trying to feed the apparently bottomless pit it called its memory.

I took holidays from the rush, in the remote, wild places; Ireland's Atlantic coast and the Scottish highlands and islands. In County Kerry, in Galway and Mayo, in Wester Ross and Sutherland and Mull and Lewis I dallied while the ship tried to bring me back with threats and cajolings and promises of all the exciting work it had for me to do.

But in early March I was finished in London, so I was sent to Germany and told to wander, asked to drift and travel round and given a few places and dates, things to do and see and think about.

Now that I had stopped *using* English, as it were, I felt free to start reading works in that language for pleasure, and that was what I did in my spare time, what little of it there was.

The year turned, gradually there was less snow, the air became warmer, and after thousands upon thousands of kilometres of roads and railway tracks and dozens of hotel rooms, I was called back in late April to the ship, to reel off my thoughts and feelings to it. The ship was trying hard to get the mood of the planet, to form the sort of impression that only direct human interaction can provide the raw material for. It was sorting and re-arranging and randomising and re-sorting its data, looking for patterns and themes, and trying to gauge and relate all the sensations its human agents had encountered, measuring them against whatever conclusions of its own it had come to while swimming through the ocean of facts and figures it had already dredged from the world. We were by no means finished, of course, and I and all the others who were down on-planet would be there for some months yet, but it was time to get some first impressions.

2.2: A Ship With A View

'So you think we should contact, do you?'

I was lying, sleepy and contented and full after a large dinner, sprawled over a cushion couch in a rec area with the lights dimmed, my feet on the arm of a seat, my arms folded, my eyes closed. A gentle, warm draft, vaguely Alpine in its fragrance, was displacing the smell of the food I and some of my friends had consumed. They were off playing some game in another part of the ship, and I could just hear their voices over the Bach I had persuaded the ship to like, and which it was now playing for me.

'Yes I do. And as soon as possible, too.'

'They'd be upset.'

'Too bad. It's for their own good.' I opened my eyes and flashed what was, I hoped, a palpably contrived smile at the ship's remote drone, which was sitting at a slightly drunken angle on the arm of the couch. Then I closed my eyes again.

'Probably it would be, but that isn't the point, really.'

'What is the point then, really?' I knew the answer too well already, but kept hoping the ship would come up with a more convincing reason than the one I knew it was going to give. Maybe one day.

'How,' the ship said through the drone, 'can we be sure we're doing the right thing? How do we know what is — or would be — for their own good, unless, over a very long period, we observe matched areas of interest — in this case planets — and compare the effects of contacting and not contacting?'

'We ought to know well enough by now. Why sacrifice this place to some experiment we already know the results of?'

'Why sacrifice it to your own restless conscience?'

I opened one eye and looked at the remote drone on the couch arm. 'A moment ago we agreed it would probably be for the best, for them, if we went in. Don't try and cloud the issue. We could

do it, we should do it. That's what I think.'

'Yes,' said the ship, 'but even so there would be technical difficulties, given the volatility of the situation. They're on a cusp; a highly heterogeneous but highly connected — and stressedly connected — civilisation. I'm not sure that one approach could encompass the needs of their different systems. The particular stage of communication they're at, combining rapidity and selectivity, usually with something added to the signal and almost always with something missed out, means that what passes for truth often has to travel at the speed of failing memories, changing attitudes and new generations. Even when this form of handicap is recognised all they ever try to do, as a rule, is codify it, manipulate it, tidy it up. Their attempts to filter become part of the noise, and they seem unable to bring any more thought to bear on the matter than that which leads them to try and simplify what can only be understood by coming to terms with its complexity.'

'Uh ... right,' I said, still trying to work out exactly what the ship was talking about.

'Hmm,' the ship said.

When the ship says 'Hmm,' it's stalling. The beast takes no appreciable time to think, and if it pretends it does then it must be waiting for you to say something to it. I out-foxed it though; I said nothing.

But, looking back at what we were talking about, and what we each said we thought, and trying to imagine what it was really thinking about, I do believe that it was then it decided to use me as it did. That 'Hmm,' marked a decision that meant I was involved the way I was in the Linter affair, and that was what the ship was really worried about; that which, all evening, during the meal and afterwards, slipping in the odd remark, the occasional question, the ship was really asking me about. But I didn't know that at the time. I was just sleepy and full and contented and warm and lying there talking to thin air, while the

remote drone sat on the arm of the couch and talked to me.

'Yes,' sighed the ship at last, 'for all our data and sophistication and analyses and statistically correct generalisations, these things remain singular and uncertain.'

'Aw,' I tutted, 'it's a hard life being a GCU. Poor ship, poor Papageno.'

'You may mock, my little chick,' the ship said with a sort of fakedly hurt sniffiness, 'but the final responsibility remains mine.'

'Ah, you're an old fraud, machine.' I grinned over at the drone. 'You'll get no sympathy out of me. You know what I think; I've told you.'

'You don't think we'd spoil the place? You seriously think they're ready for us? For what we'd do to them even with the best of intentions?'

'Ready for it? What does that matter? What does it even *mean*? Of course they aren't ready for it, of course we'll spoil the place. Are they any more ready for World War Three? You seriously think we could mess the place up more than they're doing at the moment? When they're not actually out slaughtering each other they're inventing ingenious new ways to massacre each other more efficiently in the future, and when they're not doing *that* they're committing speciescide, from the Amazon to Borneo ... or filling the seas with shit, or the air, or the land ... fuck, they could hardly make a better job of vandalising their own planet if we gave the bastards lessons.'

'But you still like them, I mean as people, the way they are.'

'No, you like them the way they are,' I told the ship, pointing at the remote drone. 'They appeal to your sense of untidiness. You think I haven't been listening all the times you've gone on about how we're "infecting the whole galaxy with sterility" ... isn't that the phrase?'

'I may have used that form of words,' the ship agreed vaguely, 'but don't you think —'

'Oh, I can't be bothered thinking now,' I said, levering myself off the couch. I stood up, yawning and stretching. 'Where's the gang gone?'

'Your companions are about to watch an amusing film I found on-planet.'

'Fine,' I said. 'I'll watch it too. Which way?'

The remote drone floated up from the couch arm.

'Follow me.' I left the alcove where we'd eaten. The drone turned round as it meandered through curtains and around chairs, tables and plants. It looked back at me. 'You don't want to talk to me? I only want to explain — '

'Tell you what, ship. You wait here and I'll hit dirt and find you one of them Roman Catholic priests and you can unburden yourself to him. I can just see it. The *Arbitrary* goes to confession. Definitely an idea whose time has come.'

I waved at some people I hadn't seen for a while, and kicked some cushions out of my way.

'You could tidy this place up a bit, too.'

'Your wish ...' the remote drone sighed, and stopped to supervise the cushions, which were dutifully rearranging themselves. I stepped down into a darkened, sound-shrouded area where people were sitting or lying in front of a 2D screen. The film was just starting. It was science fiction, of all things; called *Dark Star*. Just before I stepped through the soundfield I heard the remote drone behind me sigh to itself again.

'Ah, it's true what they say; April is the cruellest month...'

2.3: Unwitting Accomplice

It was about a week later, when I was due to go back on-planet, to Berlin, when the ship wanted to talk to me again. Things were going on as usual; the *Arbitrary* spent its time making detailed maps of everything within sight and without, dodging American and Soviet satellites and manufacturing and then sending down to the planet hundreds upon thousands of bugs to watch printing works and magazine stalls and libraries, to scan museums, workshops, studios and shops, to look into windows, gardens and forests, and to track buses, trains, cars seaships and planes. Meanwhile its effectors, and those on its main satellites, probed every computer, monitored every landline, tapped every microwave link, and listened to every radio transmission on Earth.

All Contact craft are natural raiders. They're made to love to be busy, to enjoy sticking their big noses into other people's business, and the *Arbitrary*, for all its eccentricities, was no different. I doubt if it was, or is, ever happier than when doing that vacuum-cleaner act above a sophisticated planet. By the time we were ready to leave the ship would have contained in its memory — and would have onward-transmitted to other vessels — every bit of data ever stored in the history of the planet that hadn't been subsequently obliterated. Every 1 and 0, every letter, every pixel, every sound, every subtlety of line and texture ever fashioned. It would know where every mineral deposit was buried, where all the treasure as yet undiscovered lay, where every sunken ship was, where every secret grave had been dug; and it would know the secrets of the Pentagon, the Kremlin, the Vatican...

On Earth, of course, they were quite oblivious to the fact they had a million tonnes of highly inquisitive and outrageously powerful alien spaceship

orbiting around them, and — sure enough — the locals were doing all the things *they* normally did; murdering and starving and dying and maiming and torturing and lying and so on. Pretty much business as usual in fact, and it bothered the hell out of me, but I was still hoping we'd decide to interfere and stop most of that shit. It was about this time two Boeing 747s collided on the ground in a Spanish island colony.

I was reading *Lear* for the second time, sitting underneath a full size palm tree. The ship had found the tree in the Dominican Republic, marked to be bulldozed to make way for a new hotel. Thinking it might be nice to have some plants about the place, the *Arbitrary* dug the palm up one night and brought it aboard, complete with its root system and several tens of cubic metres of sandy soil, and planted it in the centre of our accommodation section. This required quite a lot of rearranging, and a few people who'd happened to be asleep while all this was going on woke to be confronted with a twenty metre high tree when they opened their cabin doors, rising up in what had become a great central well in the acc section. Contact people are used to putting up with this sort of thing from their ships, however, and so everybody took it in their stride. Anyway, on any sensibly calibrated scale of GSV eccentricity, such a harmless, even benign prank would scarcely register.

I was sitting within sight of the door to Li 'ndane's cabin. He came out, chatting to Tel Ghemada. Li was flicking Brazil nuts into the air and running forward or bending over backwards to catch them with his mouth, while trying to carry on his side of the conversation. Tel was amused. Li flicked one nut particularly far and had to dive and twist under its trajectory, crashing into the floor and sliding into the stool I had my feet up on (and yes, I do always loaf a lot on board ships; no idea why). Li rolled over on his back,

making a show of looking around him for the Brazil nut. He looked mystified. Tel shook her head, smiling, then waved goodbye. She was one of the unfortunates trying to get some sort of human grasp of Earth's economics, and deserved all the light relief she could get. I recall that all through that year you could tell the economists by their distraught look and slightly glazed-looking eyes. Li ... well, Li was just a weirdo, and forever conducting a running battle with the finer sensibilities of the ship.

'Thank you, Li,' I said, putting my feet back on the up-ended stool. Li lay breathing heavily on the floor and looking up at me, then his lips parted in a grin to reveal the nut caught between his teeth. He swallowed, stood, pulled his pants half-way down, and proceeded to relieve himself against the trunk of the tree.

'Good for the growth,' he said when he saw me frowning at him.

'Won't be any good for your growth if the ship catches you and sends a knife missile to sort you out.'

'I can see what Mr 'ndane is doing and I wasn't going to dignify his actions with as much as a comment,' said a small drone, floating down from the foliage. It was one of a few drones the ship had built to follow a couple of birds that had been in the palm when it was hoisted up to the ship; the birds had to be fed, and tidied up after (the ship was proud that so far every dropping had been neatly intercepted in mid-air). 'But I do admit I find his behaviour slightly worrying. Perhaps he wants to tell us what he feels about Earth, or me, or worse still, perhaps he doesn't know himself.'

'Simpler than that,' Li said, putting his dick away.

'I needed a piss.' He bent down and ruffled my hair before plonking himself down at my side.

('Urinal in your room backed up has it?' muttered the drone, 'Can't say I blame it...')

'I hear you're off back to the wilderness again

tomorrow,' Li said, crossing his arms and looking

seriously at me. 'I'm free this evening; in fact I'm free now. I could offer you a small token of my esteem if you like; your last night with the good guys before you go off to infiltrate the barbarians.'

'Small?' I said.

Li smiled, made an expansive gesture with both hands. 'Well, modesty forbids...'

'No, I do.'

'You're making a dreadful mistake you know,' he said, jumping up and rubbing his belly absently while looking in the direction of the nearest dining area. 'I'm in really fine form at the moment, and I really ain't doing anything tonight.'

'Too right you aren't.'

He shrugged and blew me a kiss, then skipped off.

Li was one of those who just wouldn't have passed for Earth-human without a vast amount of physical alteration (hairy, and the wrong shape; imagine Quasimodo crossed with an ape), but frankly I think you could have put him down looking as normal as an IBM salesman and he'd still have been in jail or a fight within the hour; he couldn't have accepted the limitations on one's behaviour a place like Earth tends to insist on.

Denied his chance to go amongst the people of Earth, Li gave informal briefings for the people who were going down to the surface; those who would listen anyway. Li's briefings were short and to the point; he walked up, said, 'The fundamental thing to remember is this; most of what you encounter will be shit.' * And walked away again.

'Ms Sma, I wonder...' the small drone floated over and settled into the hollow left by Li's behind.

'Not you as well, ship, surely?'

'Hardly,' it said. 'I was merely wondering if you would do me a small favour when you go back down tomorrow.'

* Just a less precise re-statement of Sturgeon's Law. — 'The Drone'

'What sort of favour?' I said, putting Regan and Goneril down.

'Well, I'd be terribly grateful if you'd call in at Paris before you go to Berlin ... if you wouldn't mind.'

'I ... don't mind,' I said. I hadn't been to Paris yet.

'Oh good.'

'What's the problem?'

'No problem. I'd just like you to drop in on Dervley Linter. I think you know him? Well, just pop by for a chat, that's all.'

'Uh-huh,' I said.

I wondered what the ship was up to. I did have an idea (wrong, as it turned out). The *Arbitrary*, like every ship I've ever met in Contact, loved intrigues and plots. The devices are forever using their spare time to cook up pranks and schemes; little secret plans, opportunities to use delicate artifices to get people to do things, say things, behave in a certain way, just for the fun of it. The *Arbitrary* was a notorious match-maker, perfectly convinced that it knew exactly who would be best for each other, always trying to fix the crew placements to set up as many potential couples or other suitable combinations as it could. It occurred to me that it was up to something like this now, worried that I hadn't been sexually active recently, and perhaps also concerned that my last few partners had been female (the *Arb* always did have a distinctly heterosexual bent for some reason ... untidiness again perhaps?)

'Yes, just a little talk; find out how things are going, you know.'

The drone started to rise from the seat. I reached out and grabbed it, set it down on *Lear* on my lap, fixed its sensing band with what I hoped was a steely glare of my own and said, 'What are you up to?'

'Nothing!' the machine protested. 'I'd just like you to look in on Dervley and see what the two of you think about Earth, together; get a synthesis, you know. You two haven't met since we arrived

and I want to see what ideas you can come up with ... exactly how we should go about contacting them if that's what we decide to do, or what else we can do if we decide not to. That's all. No skullduggery, dear Sma.'

'Hmm,' I nodded. 'All right.'

I let the drone go. It floated up.

The damn ship was lying, and I knew it.

'Honest;' the ship said, and the drone's aura field flashed rosy with bonhomie; 'no skullduggery.'

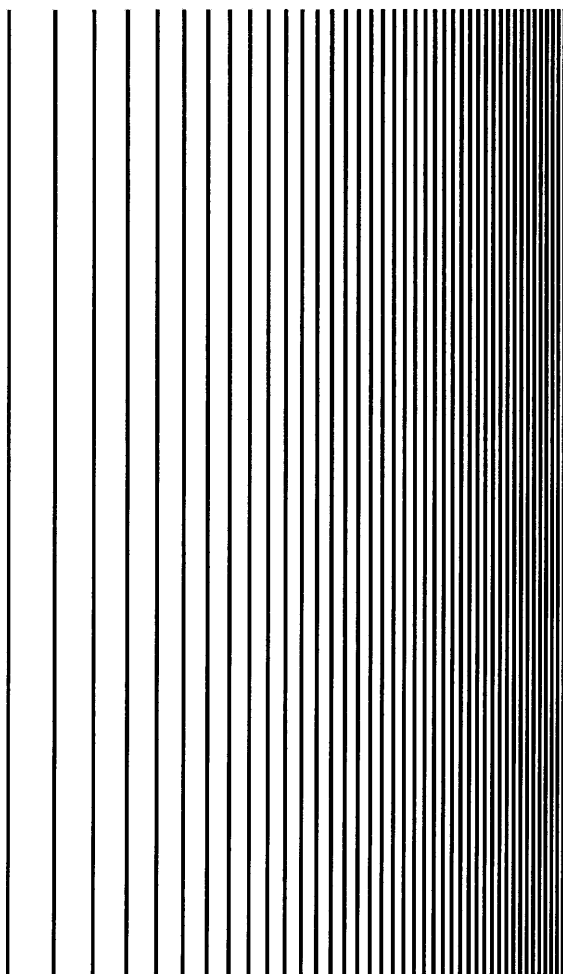
It made a bobbing motion, indicating the book on my lap. 'You read your *Lear*; I'll jet off.'

A bird flashed by, closely followed by another drone; the one I'd been talking to tore off in pursuit. I shook my head. Competing for bird shit, already.

I watched the bird and the two machines dart down a corridor like the remains of some bizarre dogfight, then went back to ...

Scene IV. The French camp. A tent.

Enter with drum and colours, Cordelia, Doctor, and soldiers.



3: Helpless In The Face Of Your Beauty

3.1: Synchronise Your Dogmas

Now, the *Arbitrary* wasn't actually insane; it did its job very well, and as far as I know none of its pranks ever actually hurt anybody, at least not physically. But you have to be a bit wary of a ship that collects snowflakes.

Put it down to its upbringing. The *Arb* was a product of one of the manufacturies in the Yinang Orbitals in the Dahass-Khree. I've checked, and those factories have produced a good percent of the million or so GCUs there are blatting about the place. That's quite a few craft *, and as far as I can see, they're all a bit crazy. It must be the Minds there I suppose; they seem to like turning out eccentric ships. Shall I name names? See if you've heard of any of this lot and their little escapades: The ... *Cantankerous*, *Only Slightly Bent*, *I Thought He Was With You*, *Space Monster*, *A Series Of Unlikely Explanations*, *Big Sexy Beast*, *Never Talk To Strangers*, *It'll Be Over By Christmas* **, *Funny*, *It Worked Last Time* ... *Boo!*, *Ultimate Ship The Second* ... etc etc. Need I say more?

Anyway, true to form, the *Arbitrary* had a little surprise for me when I walked into the top hangar space the next morning.

Dawn was sweeping like an unrolled carpet of light and shadow over the Northern European Plain and pinkening the snowy peaks of the Alps while I walked along the main corridor to the Bay, yawning and checking my passport and other papers (at least partly to annoy the ship; I knew damn well it wouldn't have made any mistakes), and making sure the drone following me had all my luggage.

I stepped into the hangar and was immediately confronted by a large red Volvo station wagon.

* (About ten thousand, of course. Ms Sma's mental arithmetic never was too hot. — 'The Drone')

** This is an extremely strained translation, but it's the best available.
— 'The Drone'

It sat gleaming in the midst of the collection of modules, drones and platforms. I wasn't in the mood to argue, so I let the drone deposit my gear in the back and went to sit in the driver's seat, shaking my head. There was nobody else about. I waved goodbye to the drone as the automobile lifted gently into the air and made its way to the rear of the ship over the tops of the other devices in the Bay. They glittered in the brightness of the hangar lights as the big estate, wheels sagging, was pushed above them to the doorfields, and then into space.

The Bay door started to move back into place as we dropped beneath it and turned. The door slid into place, cutting off the light from the Bay; I was in perfect darkness for a moment, then the ship switched on the auto's lights.

'Ah, Sma?' the ship said from the stereo.

'What?'

'Seatbelt.'

I remember sighing. I think I shook my head again, too.

We dropped in blackness, still inside the ship's inner field. As we finished turning, the Volvo's headlights picked out the slab-sided length of the *Arbitrary*, showing a very dull white inside its darkfield. Actually it was quite impressive, and oddly calming.

The ship killed the lights as we left the outer field. Suddenly I was in real space, the great gulf of spangled black before me, the planet like some vast droplet of water beneath, swirled with the pinpoint lights of Central and South America. I could make out San José, Panamá City, Bogotá and Quito. I looked back, but even knowing the ship was there I could see no sign that the stars it showed on its field skin weren't real.

I always did that, and always felt the same twinge of regret, even fear, knowing I was leaving our safe haven ... but I soon settled, and enjoyed the trip down, riding through the atmosphere in

my absurd motor car. The ship switched on the stereo again, and played me 'Serenade' by the Steve Miller Band. Somewhere over the Atlantic, off Portugal I think, and just at the line, 'The sun comes up, and shines all around me ...' guess what happened?

All I can suggest is that you look again at some picture of it, half black with a billion scattered lights and streaks of dawning colour; I can't describe it further. We fell quickly.

The car landed in the middle of some old coal workings in the unlovely north of France, near Béthune. By that time it was fully light. The field around the car popped and the two small platforms under the auto appeared, white slivers in the misty morning. They disappeared with their own 'pop's as the ship displaced them.

I drove to Paris. Living in Kensington I'd had a smaller car, a VW Golf, and the Volvo was like a tank after that. The ship spoke through my terminal brooch telling me which route to take to Paris, and then guided me through the streets to Linter's place. Even so it was a slightly traumatic experience because the whole city seemed snarled up with some cycle race, so when I eventually arrived at the courtyard just off the Boulevard St Germain, where Linter had an apartment, I was in no mood to find that he wasn't there.

'Well where the hell *is* he?' I demanded, standing on the balcony outside the apartment, hands on hips, glaring at the locked door. It was a sunny day, getting hot.

'I don't know,' the ship said through the brooch. I looked down at the thing, for all the good that did. 'What?'

'Dervley has taken to leaving his terminal in his apartment when he goes out.'

'He — ' I stopped there, took a few deep breaths, and sat down on the steps. I switched my terminal off.

Something was going on. Linter was still here in Paris, despite the fact this was where he'd been sent originally; his stay here shouldn't have been any longer than mine in London. Nobody on the ship had seen him since we'd first arrived; it looked like he hadn't been back to the ship at all. All the rest of us had. Why was he staying on here? And what was he thinking of, going out without taking his terminal? It was the act of a madman; what if something happened to him? What if he got knocked down in the street? (This seemed quite likely, judging from the standard of Parisian driving I'd encountered.) Or beaten up in a fight? And why was the ship treating all this so matter-of-factly? Going out without your terminal was acceptable enough on some cosy Orbital, and positively commonplace in a Rock or onboard ship, but *here*? Like taking a stroll through a game park without a gun ... and just because the natives did it all the time didn't make it any less crazy.

I was quite certain now there was much more to this little jaunt to Paris than the ship had led me to believe. I tried to get some more information out of the beast, but it stuck to its ignorant act and so I gave up and left the car in the courtyard while I went for a walk.

I walked down the St Germain until I came to the St Michel, then headed for the Seine. The weather was bright and warm, the shops busy, the people as cosmopolitan as they were in London, if a little more stylishly dressed, on average. I think I was disappointed at first; the place wasn't that different. You saw the same products, the same signs; Mercedes-Benz, Westinghouse, American Express, De Beers, and so on ... but gradually a more animated flavour of the city came through. A little more of Miller's Paris (I'd zipped through the *Tropics* the previous evening, as well as crossing them that morning), even if it was a little tamed with the passing of the years.

It was a different mix, another blend of the same ingredients; the traditional, the commercial, the nationalist... I rather liked the language. I could just about make myself understood, at a fairly low level (my accent was *formidable*, the ship had assured me), and could more or less read all the signs and advertisements ... but spoken at the standard rate I couldn't make out more than one word in ten. So the language, in the mouths of those *Parisiens* was like music, one unbroken flow of sound.

On the other hand, the populace seemed very reluctant to use any other language save their own even when they were technically able to, and if anything there seemed to be even fewer people in Paris willing and able to speak English than there were Londoners likewise equipped to tackle French. Post-Imperial snobbishness, perhaps.

In the shadow of Notre Dame I stood, thinking hard as I looked at that dull froth of brown stone which is the façade (I didn't go in; I was fed up with cathedrals, and by that time even my interest in castles was flagging). The ship wanted me to talk with Linter, for reasons I couldn't understand and it wasn't prepared to explain. Nobody had seen the guy, nobody had been able to call him, and nobody had received a message from him all the time we'd been over Earth. What had happened to him? And what was I supposed to do about it?

I walked along the banks of the Seine with all that cluttered, heavy architecture around me, and wondered.

I remember the smell of roasting coffee (coffee was soaring in price at the time; them and their Commodities!), and the light that struck off the cobbles as little men turned on taps inside the sidewalks to wash the streets. They used old rags slung in front of the kerbs to divert the water this way and that.

For all my fruitless pondering, it was still wonderful to be there; there was something different about the city, something that really did make you feel glad to be alive.

Somehow I found my way to the upstream end of the Ile de Cité, although I'd meant to head towards the Pompidou Centre and then double back and cross by the Pont des Arts. There was a little triangular park at the island end, like some green fore-castle on a seaship, prow-facing those big-city waters of the dirty old Seine.

I walked into the park, hands in pockets, just wandering, and found some curiously narrow and austere — almost threatening — steps leading down between masses of rough-surfaced white stone. I hesitated, then went down, as though towards the river. I found myself in an enclosed courtyard; the only other exit I could see was down a slope to the water, but that was barred by a jagged construction of black steel. I felt uneasy. There was something about the hard geometry of the place that induced a sense of threat, of smallness and vulnerability; those jutting weights of white stone somehow made you think of how delicately crushable human bones were. I seemed to be alone. I stepped, reluctantly inquisitive, into the dark, narrow doorway that led back underneath the sunlit park.

It was the memorial to the Deportation.

I remember a thousand tiny lights, in rows, down a grilled-off tunnel, a recreated cell, fine words embossed ... but I was in a daze. It's over a century ago now, but I still feel the cold of that place; I speak these words and a chill goes up my back; I edit them on screen and the skin on my arms, calves and flanks goes tight.

The effect remains as sharp as it was at the time; the details were as hazy a few hours afterwards as they are now, and as they will be until the day I die.

3.2: Just Another Victim Of The Ambient Morality

I came out stunned. I was angry at them, then. Angry at them for surprising me, touching me like that. Of course I was angry at their stupidity, their manic barbarity, their unthinking, animal obedience, their appalling cruelty; everything that the memorial evoked ... but what really hit me was that these people could create something that spoke so eloquently of their own ghastly actions; that they could fashion a work so humanly redolent of their own inhumanity. I hadn't thought them capable of that, for all the things I'd read and seen, and I didn't like to be surprised.

I left the island and walked along the right bank down towards the Louvre, and wandered through its galleries and halls, seeing, but not seeing, just trying to calm down again. I glided a little *soffnow** to help the process along, and by the time I came to the Mona Lisa I was quite composed again. The *Giaconda* was a disappointment; too small and brown and surrounded by people and cameras and security. The lady smiled serenely from behind thick glass.

I couldn't find a seat and my feet were getting sore, so I wandered out into the Tuileries, along broad and dusty avenues between small trees, and eventually found a bench by an octagonal pond where small boys and their *pères* sailed model yachts. I watched them.

Love. Maybe it was love. Could that be it? Had Linter fallen for somebody, and was the ship therefore concerned he might not want to leave, if and when we had to? Just because that was the start of a thousand sentimental stories didn't mean that it didn't actually happen. Perhaps the ship wanted to use me as a distraction. Maybe it thought Linter would take one look at me and

* Effectively untranslatable. - 'The Drone'

fall madly in love with me instead, or just
incandesce with lust, and so be saved... Except
I knew I wasn't *that* attractive.

I sat by the octagonal pond, thinking about all this,
and the same wind that ruffled my hair made
the sails of the little yachts flutter and flap, and in
that uncertain breeze they nosed through the
choppy waters, and banged into the wall of the
pond, or were caught by chubby hands and
sent bobbing back out again across the waves.

I circled back via the Invalides, with more
predictable trophies of war: old Panther tanks,
and rows of ancient cannons like bodies
stacked against a wall. I had lunch in a smoky
little place near the St Sulpice Metro; you sat on
high stools at a bar and they selected a piece
of red meat for you and put it, dripping blood,
on a grid over an open pit filled with burning
charcoal. The meat sizzled on the grille right in
front of you while you had your *aperitif*, and you
told them when you felt it was ready. They kept
going to take it off and serve it to me, and I kept
saying, '*Non non; un peu plus ... s'il vous plait.*'

The man next to me ate his rare, with blood still oozing
from the centre. After a few years in Contact
you get used to that sort of thing, but I was still
surprised I could sit there and do that, especially
after the memorial. I knew so many people
who'd have been outraged at the very thought.
Come to think of it, there would have been
millions of vegetarians on Earth who'd have
been equally disgusted (would they have
eaten our vat-grown meats? I wonder).

The black grill over the charcoal pit kept reminding
me of the gratings in the memorial, but I just kept
my head down and ate my meal, or most of it.
I had a couple of glasses of rough red wine too,
which I let have some effect, and by the time I
was finished I was feeling reasonably together
again, and quite well disposed to the locals. I
even remembered to pay without being asked
(I don't think you ever quite get used to *buying*),

and went out into the bright sunshine. I walked back to Linter's, looking at shops and buildings and trying not to get knocked down in the street. I bought a paper on the way back, to see what our unsuspecting hosts thought was newsworthy. It was oil. Jimmy Carter was trying to persuade Americans to use less petrol, and the Norwegians had a blow-out in the North Sea. The ship had mentioned both items in its more recent synopses, but of course *it* knew Carter's measures weren't going to get through without drastic amendment, and that the drilling rig had had a piece of equipment fitted upside down. I selected a magazine as well, so arrived back at Linter's clutching my copy of *Stern* and expecting to have to drive away. I'd already made tentative plans; going to Berlin via the first World War graves and the old battle grounds, following the theme of war, death and memorials all the way to the riven capital of the Third Reich itself.

But Linter's car was there in the courtyard, parked beside the Volvo. His auto was a Rolls Royce Silver Cloud; the ship believed in indulging us. Anyway, it claimed that making a show was better cover than trying to stay inconspicuous; western capitalism in particular allowed the rich just about the right amount of behavioural leeway to account for the oddities our alienness might produce.

I went up the steps and pressed the bell. I waited for a short while, hearing noises within the flat. A small notice on the far side of the courtyard caught my attention, and brought a sour smile to my face.

Linter appeared, unsmiling, at the door; he held it open for me, bowing a little.

'Ms Sma. The ship told me you'd be coming.'

'Hello.' I entered.

The apartment was much larger than I'd anticipated. It smelled of leather and new wood; it was light and airy and well decorated and full of books

and records, tapes and magazines, paintings and *objet d'art*, and it didn't look one little bit like the place I'd had in Kensington. It felt lived in. Linter waved me towards a black leather chair at one end of a Persian carpet covering a teak floor and went over to a drinks cabinet, turning his back to me. 'Do you drink?'

'Whisky,' I said, in English. 'With or without the "e".'

I didn't sit down, but wandered around the room, looking.

'I have Johnny Walker Black Label.'

'Fine.'

I watched him clamp one hand round the square bottle and pour. Dervley Linter was taller than me, and quite muscular. To an experienced eye there was something not quite right — in Earth human terms — about the set of his shoulders. He leaned over the bottles and glasses like a threat, as though he wanted to bully the drink from one to the other.

'Anything in it?'

'No thanks.'

He handed me the glass, bent to a small fridge, extracted a bottle and poured himself a Budweiser (the real stuff, from Czechoslovakia). Finally, this little ceremony over, he sat down. Bahauss chair, and it looked original.

His face was calm, serious. Each feature seemed to demand separate attention; the large, mobile mouth, the flared nose, the bright but deep-set eyes, the stage-villain brows and surprisingly lined forehead. I tried to recall what he'd looked like before, but could only remember vaguely, so it was impossible to tell how much of the way he looked now had been carried over from what would be classed as his 'normal' appearance. He rolled the beer glass around in his large hands.

'The ship seems to think we should talk,' he said. He drank about half the beer in one gulp and placed the glass on a small table made of polished granite. I adjusted my brooch.

< 'You don't think we should though, no?'

He spread his hands wide, then folded them over his chest. He was dressed in two pieces of an expensive looking black suit; trousers and waistcoat. 'I think it might be pointless.'

'Well ... I don't know ... does there have to be a point to everything? I thought ... the ship suggested we might have a talk, that's —'

'Did it?'

'— all. Yes.' I coughed. 'I don't ... it didn't tell me what's going on.'

Linter looked steadily at me, then down at his feet. Black brogues. I looked around the room as I sipped my whisky, looking for signs of female habitation, or for anything that might indicate there were two people living here. I couldn't tell. The room was crowded with stuff; prints and oils on the walls, most of the former either Breughels or Lowrys; Tiffany lampshades, a Bang and Olafsen Hifi unit, several antique clocks, what looked like a dozen or so Dresden figurines, a Chinese cabinet of black lacquer, a large four-fold screen with peacocks sewn onto it, the myriad feathers like displayed eyes...

'What *did* it tell you?' Linter asked.

I shrugged. 'What I said. It said it wanted me to have a talk with you.'

He smiled in an unimpressed sort of way as though the whole conversation was hardly worth the effort, then looked away, through the window. He didn't seem to be going to say anything. A flash of colour caught my eye, and I looked over at a large television, one of those with small doors that close over the screen and make it look like a cabinet when it isn't in use. The doors weren't fully shut, and it was on behind them.

'It's on,' Linter said.

'No, it's —' I began, but he rose out of the seat, gripping its elegant arms, went to the set and spread its doors open with a dramatic gesture before resuming his seat.

I didn't want to sit and watch television, but the sound was down so it wasn't especially intrusive. 'The control unit's on the table,' Linter said, pointing. 'I wish you — somebody — wish you'd tell me what's going on.'

He looked at me as though this was an obvious lie rather than a genuine plea, and glanced over at the TV. It must have been on one of the ship's own channels, because it was changing all the time, showing different shows and programmes from a variety of countries, using various transmission formats, and waiting for a channel to be selected. A group in bright pink suits danced mechanically to an unheard song. They were replaced with a picture of the Ekofisk platform, spouting a dirty brown fountain of oil and mud. Then the screen changed again, to show the crowded cabin scene from *A Night At The Opera*.

'So you don't know anything?' Linter lit a Sobranie. This, like the ship's "Hmm", had to be for effect (unless he liked the taste, which has never been a convincing line). He didn't offer me one.

'No, no, no I don't. Look... I can see the ship wanted me here for more than this talk ... but don't you play games too. That crazy thing sent me down here in that Volvo; the whole way. I half expected it not to have baffled it either; I was waiting for a pair of Mirages to come to intercept. I've got a long drive to Berlin as well, you know? So... Just tell me, or tell me to go, all right?'

He drew on the cigarette, studying me through the smoke. He crossed his legs and brushed some imaginary fluff off the trouser cuffs and stared at his shoes. 'I've told the ship that when it leaves, I'm staying here on Earth. Regardless of what else might happen.' He shrugged. 'Whether we contact or not.' He looked at me, challenging.

'Any ... particular reason?' I tried to sound unfazed. I still thought it must be a woman.

'Yes. I like the place.' He made a noise between a snort and a laugh. 'I feel alive for a change.'

I want to stay. I'm going to. I'm going to live here.'

'You want to die here?'

He smiled, looked away from me, then back. 'Yes.'

Quite positively. This shut me up for a moment.

I felt uncomfortable. I got up and walked round the room, looking at the bookshelves. He seemed to have read about the same amount as me. I wondered if he'd crammed it all, or read any of it at normal speed: Dostoevsky, Borges, Greene, Swift, Lucretius, Kafka, Austin, Grass, Bellow, Joyce, Confucius, Scott, Mailer, Camus, Hemingway, Dante. 'You probably will die here, then,' I said lightly. 'I suspect the ship wants to observe, not contact. Of course —'

'That'll suit me. Fine.'

'Hmm. Well, it isn't ... official yet, but I ... that's the way it'll go, I suspect.' I turned away from the books.

'It does? You really want to die here? Are you serious? How —'

He was sitting forward in the chair, combing his black hair with one hand, pushing the long, ringed fingers through his curls. A silver stud decorated the lobe of his left ear.

'Fine,' he repeated. 'It'll suit me perfectly. We'll ruin this place if we interfere.'

'They'll ruin it if we don't.'

'Don't be trite, Sma.' He stubbed the cigarette out hard, breaking it in half, mostly unsmoked.

'And if they blow the place up?'

'Mmm.'

'Well?'

'Well what?' he demanded.

A siren sounded on the St Germain, dopplering.

'Might be what they're heading for. Want to see them moth themselves in front of their own ...'

'Ah, bullshit.' His face crinkled with annoyance.

'Bullshit yourself,' I told him. 'Even the ship's worried.'

The only reason they haven't made a final decision yet is because they know how bad it'll look short term if they do.'

'Sma, I don't care. I don't want to leave. I don't want to have any more to do with the ship or the Culture or anything connected with it.'

'You must be crazy. As crazy as they are. They'll kill you; you'll get crushed under a truck or mangled in a plane crash or ... burned up in some fire or something...'

'So I take my chances.'

'Well ... what about what they'd call the "security" aspect? What if you're only injured and they take you to hospital? You'll never get out again; they'll take one look at your guts or your blood and they'll know you're alien. You'll have the military all over you. They'll *dissect* you.'

'Not very likely. But if it happens, it happens.'

I sat down again. I was reacting just the way the ship had known I would. I thought Linter was mad just the way the *Arbitrary* did, and it was using me to try and talk some sense into him. Doubtless the ship had already tried, but equally obviously the nature of Linter's decision was such that the *Arbitrary* was the last thing that was going to have any influence. Technologically and morally the ship represented the most finely articulated statement the Culture was capable of producing, and that very sophistication had the beast hamstrung, here.

I have to admit I felt a degree of admiration for Linter's stand, even though I still thought he was being stupid. There might or might not be a local involved, but I was already getting the impression it was more complicated — and more difficult to handle — than that. Maybe he *had* fallen in love, but not with anything as simple as a person. Maybe he'd fallen in love with Earth itself; the whole fucking planet. So much for Contact screening; they were supposed to keep people out who might fall like that. If that was what had happened then the ship had problems indeed. Falling in love with somebody, they say, is a little like getting a tune into your head and not being able to stop whistling

it ... except much more so, and — from what I'd heard — going native the way I suspected Linter might be was as far beyond loving another person as that was beyond getting a tune stuck in your head.

I felt suddenly angry, at Linter and the ship.

'I think you're taking a very selfish and stupid risk that's not just bad for you, and bad for the ... for us; for the Culture, but also bad for these people. If you do get caught, if you're discovered ... they *are* going to get paranoid, and they might feel threatened and hostile in any contact they are involved, in or ex. You could send them ... make them crazy. Insane.'

'You said they were that already.'

'And you *do* stand a less chance of living your full term. Even if you don't; so you live for centuries. How d'you explain that?'

'They may have anti-geriatrics themselves by that time. Besides, I can always move around.'

'They won't have anti-geriatrics for fifty years or more; centuries if they relapse, even without a Holocaust. Yeah; so move around, make yourself a fugitive, stay alien, stay apart. You'll be as cut off from them as you will be from us. Ah hell, you always will be anyway.' I was talking loudly by now. I waved one arm at the bookshelves. 'Sure read the books and see the films and go to concerts and theater and opera and all that shit; you can't *become* them. You'll still have Culture eyes, Culture brain; you can't just ... can't deny all that, pretend it never happened.' I stamped one foot on the floor. 'God *dammit*, Linter, you're just being ungrateful!'

'Listen, Sma,' he said, rising out of the seat, grabbing his beer and stalking about the room, gazing out of the windows. 'Neither of us owes the Culture anything. You know that ... Owing and being obliged and having duties and responsibilities and everything like that ... that's what *these* people have to worry about.' He turned round to look at me. 'But not me, not us. You do what

you want to do, the ship does what it wants to do, I do what I want to do. All's well. Let's just leave each other alone, yes?' He looked back at the small courtyard, finishing his beer.

'You want to be like them but you don't want to have their responsibilities.'

'I didn't say I wanted to be like them. To ... to whatever extent I do, I want to have the same sort of responsibilities, and that doesn't include worrying about what a Culture starship thinks. That isn't something any of them normally tend to worry about.'

'What if Contact surprises us both, and does come in?'

'I doubt that.'

'Me too, very much; that's why I think it might happen.'

'I don't think so. Though it is we who need them, not the other way round.' Linter turned and stared at me, but I wasn't going to start arguing on a second front now. 'But,' he said after a pause, 'the Culture can do without me.' He inspected his drained glass. 'It's going to have to.'

I was silent for a while, watching the television flip through channels. 'What about you though?' I asked eventually. 'Can you do without it?'

'Easily,' Linter laughed. 'Listen, d'you think I haven't — '

'No; you listen. How long do you think this place is going to stay the way it is now? Ten years? Twenty? Can't you see how much this place has to alter ... in just the next century? We're so used to things staying much the same, to society and technology — at least immediately available technology — hardly changing over our lifetimes that ... I don't know any of us could cope for long down here. I think it'll affect you a lot more than the locals. They're used to change, used to it all happening fast. All right, you like the way it is now, but what happens later? What if 2077 is as different from now as this is from 1877? This might be the end of a Golden Age, world war or not. What chance do you think the West has of keeping the status quo with the Third

World? I'm telling you; end of the century and you'll feel lonely and afraid and wonder why they've deserted you and you'll be the worst nostalgic they've got because you'll remember it better than they ever will and you won't remember anything else from before now.'

He just stood looking at me. The TV showed part of a ballet in black and white, then an interview; two white men who looked American somehow (and the fuzzy picture looked US standard), then a quiz show, then a puppet show, again in monochrome. You could see the strings. Linter put his glass down on the granite table and went over to the Hifi, turning on the tape deck. I wondered what little bit of planetary accomplishment I was going to be treated to.

The picture on the screen settled to one programme for a while. It looked vaguely familiar; I was sure I'd seen it. A play; last century ... American writer, but ... (Linter went back to his seat, while the music began; the *Four Seasons*.)

Henry James. *The Ambassadors*. It was a TV production I'd seen on the BBC while I was in London ... or maybe the ship had repeated it, I couldn't recall. What I did recall was the plot and the setting, both of which seemed so opposite to my little scene with Linter that I started to wonder whether the beast upstairs was watching all this. Probably was, come to think of it. And not much point in looking for anything; the ship could produce bugs so small the main problem with camera stability was Brownian motion. Was *The Ambassadors* a sign from it then? Whatever; the play was replaced by a commercial for Odor-Eaters.

'I've told you,' Linter brought me back from my musings, speaking quietly, 'I'm prepared to take my chances. Do you think I haven't thought it all through before, many times? This isn't sudden, Sma; I felt like this my first day here, but I waited for months before I said anything, so I'd be sure. It's what I've been looking for all my life, what

I've always wanted. I always knew I'd know it when I found it, and I have.' He shook his head; sadly, I thought. 'I'm staying, Sma.'

I shut up. I suspected that despite what he'd just said he hadn't thought about how much the planet would change during his long likely lifetime, and there were still other things to be said, but I didn't want to press too hard too quickly. I made myself relax on the couch and shrugged.

'Anyway, we don't know for sure what the ship's going to do; what they'll decide.'

He nodded, picked up a paperweight from the granite table and turned it over and over in his hand. The music shimmered through the room, like the sun on water reflected; points producing lines, dancing quietly. 'I know,' he said, still gazing at the heavy globe of twisted glass, 'this must seem like a mad idea ... but I just ... just *want* the place.' He looked at me — for the first time, I thought — without a challenging scowl or stern coolness.

'I know what you mean,' I said. 'But I can't understand it perfectly ... maybe I'm more suspicious than you are; it's just you tend to be more concerned for other people than for yourself sometimes ... you assume they haven't thought things through the way you would have yourself.' I sighed, almost laughed. 'I guess I'm assuming you'll ... hoping you'll change your mind.'

Linter was silent for a while, still studying the hemisphere of coloured glass. 'Maybe I will.' He shrugged massively. 'Maybe I will,' he said, looking at me speculatively. He coughed.

'Did the ship tell you I've been to India?'

'India? No; no, it didn't.'

'I went there for a couple of weeks. I didn't tell the *Arbitrary* I was going, though it found out, of course.'

'Why? I mean why did you want to go?'

'I wanted to see the place,' Linter said, sitting forward in the seat, rubbing the paperweight, then replacing it on the granite table and rubbing his

palms together. 'It was beautiful ... beautiful. If I'd had any second thoughts, they vanished there.' He looked at me, face suddenly open, intent, his hands outstretched, fingers wide. 'It's the contrast, the ...' he looked away, apparently made less articulate by the vividness of the impression. '... the highlights, the light and shade of it all. The squalor and the muck, the cripples and the swollen bellies; the whole poverty of it makes the beauty stand out ... a single pretty girl in the crowds of Calcutta seems like an impossibly fragile bloom, like a ... I mean you can't believe that the filth and the poverty hasn't somehow contaminated her ... it's like a miracle ... a revelation. Then you realise that she'll only be like that for a few years, that she'll only live a few decades, that she'll wear and have six kids and wither... The feeling, the realisation, the staggering ...' his voice trailed off and he looked, slightly helplessly, almost vulnerably, at me. It was just the point at which to make my most telling, cutting comment. But also just the point at which I could do no such thing.

So I sat still, saying nothing, and Linter said, 'I don't know how to explain it. It's alive. I'm alive. If I did die tomorrow it would have been worth it just for these last few months. I know I'm taking a risk in staying, but that's the whole point. I know I might feel lonely and afraid. I expect that's going to happen, now and again, but it'll be worth it. The loneliness will *make* the rest worth it. We expect everything to be set up just as we like it, but these people don't; they're used to having good and bad mixed in together. And that gives them an interest in living, it makes them appreciate opportunities ... these people know what tragedy is, Sma. They live it. We're just an audience.'

He sat there, looking away from me, while I stared at him. The big-city noise grumbled beyond us, and the sunlight came and went in the room as shadows of clouds passed over us, and I

thought; you poor bastard, you poor schmuck, they've got you.

Here we are with our fabulous GCU, our supreme machine; capable of outgenerating their entire civilisation and taking in Proxima Centauri on a day trip; packed with technology compared to which their citybusters are squibs and their Crays are less than calculators; a vessel casually sublime in its impregnable power and inexhaustable knowledge ... here we are with our ship and our modules and platforms, satellites and scooters and drones and bugs, sieving their planet for its most precious art, its most sensitive secrets, its finest thoughts and greatest achievements; plundering their civilisation more comprehensively than all the invaders in their history put together, giving not a damn for their puny armaments, paying a hundred times more attention to their art and history and philosophy than to their eclipsed science, glancing at their religions and politics the way a doctor would at symptoms ... and for all that, for all our power and our superiority in scale, science, technology, thought and behaviour, here was this poor sucker, besotted with them when they didn't even know he existed, spellbound with them, adoring them; and powerless. An immoral victory for the barbarians.

Not that I was in a much better position myself. I may have wanted the exact opposite of Dervley Linter, but I very much doubted I was going to get away, either. I didn't want to leave, I didn't want to keep them safe from us and let them devour themselves; I wanted maximum interference; I wanted to hit the place with a program Lev Davidovitch would have been proud of. I wanted to see the junta generals fill their pants when they realised that the future is — in Earth terms — bright, bright red.

Naturally the ship thought I was crazy too. Perhaps it imagined Linter and I would cancel each other out somehow, and we'd both be restored to sanity.

So Linter wanted nothing done to the place, and I wanted everything done to it. The ship — along with whatever other Minds were helping it decide what to do — was probably going to come down closer to Linter's position than mine, but that was the very reason the man couldn't stay. He'd be a little randomly-set time bomb ticking away in the middle of the uncontaminated experiment that Earth was probably going to become; a parcel of radical contamination ready to Heisenberg the whole deal at any moment.

There was nothing more I could do with Linter for the moment. Let him think about what I'd said. Perhaps just knowing it wasn't only the ship that thought he was being foolish and selfish would make some difference.

I got him to show me around Paris in the Rolls, then we ate — magnificently — in Montmartre, and ended up on the Left Bank, wandering the maze of streets and sampling a disgraceful number of wines and spirits. I had a room booked at the George, but stayed with Linter that night, just because it seemed the most natural thing to do — especially in that drunken state — and anyway it had been a while since I'd had somebody to hug during the night.

Next morning, before I set off for Berlin, we both exhibited just the right amount of embarrassment, and so parted friends.

3.3: Arrested Development

There is something about the very idea of a city which is central to the understanding of a planet like Earth, and particularly the understanding of that part of the then-existing group-civilisation * which called itself the West (the bit I was mostly concerned with). That idea, to my mind, met its materialist apotheosis in Berlin.

Perhaps I go into some sort of shock when I experience something deeply; I'm not sure, even at this ripe middle-age, but I have to admit that what I recall of Berlin is not arranged in my memory in any normal, chronological sequence. My only excuse is that Berlin itself was so abnormal — and yet so bizarrely representative — it was like something unreal; an occasionally macabre Disneyland which was so much a part of the real world (and the *realpolitik* world), so much a crystallisation of everything these people had managed to produce, wreck, reinstate, venerate, condemn and worship in their history that it finally transcended everything it exemplified, and took on a single — if multifariously faceted — meaning of its own; a sum, an answer, a statement no city in its right mind would want or be able to arrive at. I said we were more interested in Earth's art than anything else; very well, Berlin was its masterpiece, an equivalent for the ship.

I remember walking round the city, day and night, seeing buildings whose walls were still pocked with bullet holes from a war ended thirty-two years earlier. Lit, crowded, otherwise ordinary office buildings looked as though they'd been sandblasted with grains the size of tennis balls; police stations, apartment blocks, churches, park walls, the very sidewalks themselves bore the same stigmata of ancient violence, the mark of metal on stone.

* Another tricky one. Ms Sma keeps on using words there is no direct English equivalent for. — 'The Drone'

I could read those walls; reconstruct from that wreckage the events of a day, or an afternoon, or an hour, or just a few minutes. Here the machine-gun fire had sprayed, light ordnance like acid pitting, heavier guns leaving tracks like a succession of pickaxe blows on ice; here shaped-charge and kinetic weapons had pierced — the holes had been bricked up — and sprayed long rays of jagged holes across the stone; here a grenade had exploded, fragments blasting everywhere, shallow cratering the sidewalk and spraying the wall (or not; sometimes there was untouched stone in one direction, like a shrapnel shadow, where perhaps a soldier left his image on the city at the moment of his death).

In one place all the marks, on a railway arch, were wildly slanted, cutting a swathe across one side of the arch, hitting the pavement, then slanting up on the other side of the alcove. I stood and wondered at that, then realised that three decades before some Red Army soldier had probably crouched there, drawing fire from a building across the street... I turned, and could even see which window...

I took the West-operated U-bahn under the wall, cutting across from one part of West Berlin to the other, from Hallesches Tor to Tegel. At Friedrichstrasse you could quit the train and enter East Berlin, but the other stations under East were closed; guards with submachine guns stood watching the train rush through the deserted stations; an eerie blue glow lit this film-set of a scene, and the train's passing sent ancient papers scattering, and lifted the torn corners of old posters still stuck to the wall. I had to make that journey twice, to be sure I hadn't imagined it all; the other passengers had looked as bored and zombie-like as underground passengers usually do.

There was something of that frightening, ghostly emptiness about the city itself at times. Although

so surely enclosed, West Berlin was big; full of parks and trees and lakes — more so than most cities — and that, combined with the fact that people were still leaving the city in their tens of thousands each year (despite all sorts of grants and tax concessions designed to persuade them to stay) meant that while there was the same quality of high capitalist presence I'd been immersed in in London and sensed in Paris, the density was much reduced; there simply wasn't the same pressure to develop and redevelop land. So the city was full of those shot-up buildings and wide open spaces; bomb sites with shattered ruins on the skyline, empty-windowed and roofless like great abandoned ships adrift on seas of weeds. Alongside the elegance of the Kurfurstendamm, this legacy of destruction and privation became just another vast art work, like the quaintly shattered steeple of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, set at the end of the K-damm like a folly at the end of an avenue of trees.

Even the two rail systems contributed to the sense of unreality the city inspired, the sense of continually stepping from one continuum to another. Instead of the West running everything on its side, and the East everything on its, the East ran the S-bahn (above ground) on both sides, the West the U-bahn (underground) on both sides. The U-bahn served those ghostly stations under the East, the S-bahn had its own tumbledown, weed-strewn stations in the West. Both ignored the wall, indeed, because the S-bahn went over the top of it. And the S-bahn went underground in places. And the U-bahn surfaced frequently. Let me labour the point and say that even double-decker buses and double-decker trains added to the sense of a multi-layered reality. In a place like Berlin, wrapping the Reichstag up like a parcel wasn't even remotely as weird an idea as the city was itself.

I went once via Friedrichstrasse and once through Checkpoint Charlie, into the East. Sure enough, there were places where time seemed to have stopped there too, and many of the buildings and signs looked as though a patina of dust had started settling over them thirty years ago, and never been disturbed since. There were shops in the East where you could only spend foreign currency. Somehow they just didn't look like real shops; it was as though some seedy entrepreneur from a degenerate semi-socialist future had tried to create a fairground display modelled on a late twentieth-century capitalist shop, and failed, through lack of imagination.

It wasn't convincing. I wasn't convinced. I was a little shaken, too. Was this farce, this gloomy side-show trying to mimic the West — and not even doing that very well — the best job the locals could make of socialism? Maybe there was something so basically wrong with them even the ship hadn't spotted it yet; some genetic flaw that meant they were never going to be able to live and work together without an external threat; never stop fighting, never stop making their awful, awesome, bloody messes. Perhaps despite all our resources there was nothing we *could* do for them.

The feeling passed. There was nothing to prove this wasn't just a momentary, and — coming so early — understandable aberration. Their history wasn't so far off the mean track, they were going through what a thousand other civilisations had gone through, and no doubt in the childhood of each of those there had been countless occasions when all any decent, well-balanced, reasonable and humanely concerned observer would have wanted to do was scream in despair.

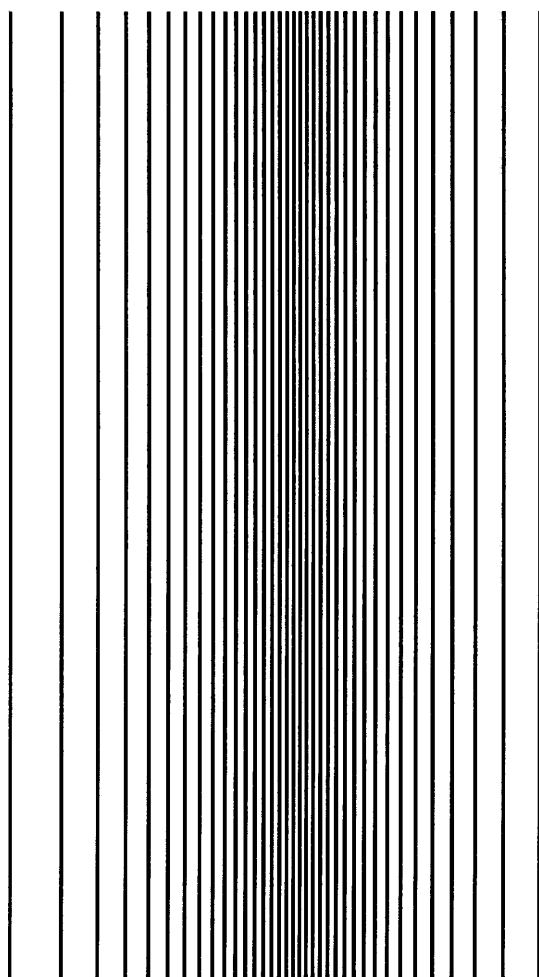
It was ironic that in this so-called Communist capital they were so interested in money; at least a dozen people came up to me in the East and asked me if I wanted to change some. Would

this represent a qualitative or quantitative change? I asked (blank looks, mostly). 'Money implies poverty,' I quoted them. Hell, they should engrave that in stone over the hangar door of every GCU.

I stayed for a month, visiting all the tourist haunts, walking and driving and training and busing through the city, sailing on and swimming in the Havel, and riding through Grunewald and Spandau forests.

I left by the Hamburg corridor, at the ship's suggestion. The road went through villages stuck in the fifties. The eighteen fifties, sometimes; chimney sweeps on bikes wore tall black hats and carried their black-caned brushes over their shoulders like huge sooty daisies stolen from a giant's garden. I felt quite self-conscious and rich in my big red Volvo.

I left the car on a track by the side of the Elbe that night. A module sighed out of the darkness, dark on dark, and took me to the ship, which was over the Pacific at the time, tracking a school of sperm whales directly beneath and plundering their great barrel-brains with its effectors while they sang.



4: Heresiarch

4.1: Minority Report

I should have known not to tell Li 'ndane about Paris and Berlin, but I did. I was floating in the AG space with a few other people after a dip in the ship's pool. I'd actually been talking to my friends, Roghres Shasapt and Tagm Lokri, but Li was there, eavesdropping avidly.

'Ah,' he said, floating over to wag one finger under my nose. 'That's it.'

'That's what?'

'That monument. I see it now. Think about it.'

'The memorial to the Deportation, in Paris, you mean.'

'Cunt. That's what I mean.'

I shook my head. 'Li, I don't think I know what you're talking about.'

'Ah, he's just lusting,' Roghres said. 'He pined when you left last time.'

'Nonsense,' Li said, and flicked a blob of water at Roghres. 'What I'm talking about is this; most memorials are like pricks; cenotaphs; columns. That monument Sma saw is a cunt; it's even in a divide of the river; very pubic. From this, and Sma's overall attitude, it's obvious that Sma is sublimating her sexuality in all this Contact nonsense.'

'Well I never knew that,' I said.

'Basically, what you want, Diziet, is to be fucked by an entire civilisation, an entire planet. I suppose this makes you a good little Contact operative, if that's what you want to be — '

'Li, of course, is only here for the different tan,' Tagm interrupted.

' — but I would say,' Li continued, 'that it's better not to sublimate anything. If what you want is a good screw — ' (Li used the English word) ' — then a good screw is what you ought to have, not a meaningful confrontation with a backwater rockball infested with slaving death-zealots on a terminal power trip.'

'I still say it's you who wants the good screw,' Roghres said.

'Exactly!' Li exclaimed, throwing his arms wide, scattering more water drops, wobbling in the null G. 'But I don't deny it.'

'Just Mr Natural,' Tagm nodded.

'What's wrong with being natural?' demanded Li.

'But I remember just the other day you were saying that the trouble with humans is that they were too natural, not civilised enough,' Tagm said, then turned to me. 'Mind you, that was then; Li can change his faster than a GCU going for a refit record.'

'There's natural and natural,' Li said. 'I'm naturally civilised and they're naturally barbarians, therefore I should be as natural as possible and they should do all they can not to be. But this is getting off the subject. What I say is that Sma has a definite psychological problem and I think that as I'm the only person on this machine interested in Freudian analysis, I should be the one to help her.'

'That's unbelievably kind of you,' I told Li.

'Not at all,' Li waved his hand. He must have scattered most of his water drops towards us, because he was gradually floating away from us, towards the far end of the AG hall.

'Freud!' snorted Roghres derisively, a little high on *Jumble*.

'You heathen,' said Li, eyes narrowed. 'I suppose your heroes are Marx and Lenin.'

'Hell no; I'm an Adam Smith man myself,' muttered Roghres. She started to tumble head over heels in the air, doing slow foetal-spread-eagle exercises.

'Rubbish,' Li spat (literally, but I saw it coming and dodged).

'Li, you really are the horniest* human on this ship,' Tagm told him. 'You're the one who needs the analysis. This obsession with sex, it's just not —'

'I'm obsessed with sex?' Li said, poking himself in the chest with a thumb, then throwing back his head.

'HA!' He laughed. 'Listen;' he arranged himself in

* Sma refuses to choose between British English and American English. This would be 'randiest' in British English. — 'The Drone'

what would have passed for a lotus position on Earth, had there been a floor to sit on, and put one hand on his hip while pointing the other vaguely to his right; *they're* the ones obsessed with sex. Do you know how many words there are for "prick" in English? Or "cunt"? Hundreds; hundreds. How many have we got? One; one for each, for ----- * usage as well as for anatomical designation. Neither of them swear-words. All I do is readily admit I want to put one in the other. Ready, willing and interested. What's wrong with that?

'Nothing as such,' I told him. 'But there's a point where interest becomes obsession, and I think most people regard obsession as a bad thing because it makes for less variety, less flexibility.'

Li, still floating slowly away from us, nodded fiercely.

'I'll just say one thing; it's an obsession with flexibility and variety that makes this so-called Culture so boring.'

'Li started a Boredom Society while you were away,' Tagm explained, smiling at me. 'Nobody else joined though.'

'It's going very well,' Li confirmed. 'I've changed the title to the Ennui League, by the way. Yes, boredom is an under-rated facet of existence in our pseudo-civilisation. While at first I thought it might be interesting, in a boring sense, for people to be together when they were extremely bored, I realise now that it is a profoundly moving and deeply average experience to do nothing whatsoever entirely and completely by yourself.'

'You think Earth has a lot to teach us in this respect?'

Tagm said, then turned and said to the nearest wall. 'Ship, put the air on medium, would you?'

'Earth is a deeply boring planet,' Li said gravely, as one end of the hall began to waft the air towards us, and the other turned intake. We began to drift in the breeze.

* The word Sma insists upon using is exactly midway in meaning between 'common' and 'vulgar'. Take your pick. — 'The Drone'

'Earth? Boring?' I said. The water was drying on my skin.

'What is the *point* of a planet where you can hardly set foot without tripping over somebody killing somebody else, or painting something or making music or pushing back the frontier of science or being tortured or killing themselves or dying in a car crash or hiding from the police or suffering from some absurd disease or — '

We hit the soft, porous intake wall ('Hey, this wall sucks!' Roghres giggled), and the three of us bounced, and passed Li, a little behind us and travelling in the opposite direction, still heading for the wall. Roghres watched him going by with the studied interest of a bar drunk watching a fly on the rim of a glass. 'Far out.'

'Anyway,' I said, as we passed. 'How does all this make it boring? Surely there's so much going on — '

'That it's deeply boring. An excess of boringness does not make a thing interesting except in the driest academic sense. A place is not boring if you have to look really hard for something which is interesting. If there is absolutely nothing interesting about any particular place, then that is a perfectly interesting and quintessentially un-boring place.' Li hit the wall and bounced. We had slowed, stopped, and reversed, so were coming back down again. Roghres waved at Li as we passed him.

'But,' I said, 'Earth — let me get this right — Earth, where everything's happening, is so full of interesting things that it's boring.' I squinted at Li. 'Is that what you mean?'

'Something like that.'

'You're crazy.'

'You're boring.'

4.2: Happy Idiot Talk

I'd talked to the ship about Linter the day after I saw him in Paris, and a few times subsequently. I don't think I was able to offer much hope that the man would change his mind; the ship used its Depressed voice when we talked about him.

Of course if the ship wanted to it could have made the whole argument academic by just kidnapping Linter. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that the ship had bugs or microdrones or something trailing the man; at the first hint that he was thinking about staying the *Arbitrary* would have made sure that it couldn't lose him, even when he went out without his terminal. For all I knew it watched all of us, though it protested that it didn't when I asked it (about Linter the ship was evasive, and there's nothing more slippery in the galaxy than a GCU being cagey, so a straight answer was out of the question.* But draw your own conclusions.)

Nothing would have been easier, technically, for the ship to drug Linter, or have a drone stun him, and bundle him into a module. I suppose it could even have displaced him; beamed him up like in *Star Trek* (which the ship thought was a great hoot).** But I couldn't see it doing anything like that.

I have yet to meet a ship — and I don't think I'd *like* to meet a ship — that didn't take far more pride in its mental abilities than its physical power, and for the ship to kidnap Linter would be an admission that it hadn't had the wit to out-think the man. No doubt it would make the best possible job of justifying such an act if it did do it, and it would certainly get away with it — no quorum of other Contact Minds would offer it the choice of exile or restructuring — but boy would

* I think this jars abominably, but herself disagrees. — 'The Drone'

** Ms Sma is confusing matter transmission (sic) with trans-dimensional displacement of a remotely induced singularity. I despair. — 'The Drone'

it lose face. GCUs can be bitchy as hell, and the *Arbitrary* would be the laughing-stock of the Contact fleet for months, minimum.

'Would you even think about it?'

'I think of everything,' the ship replied tartly. 'But no, I don't think I'd do it, even as a last resort.'

A whole bunch of us had watched *King Kong* and now we were sitting by the ship's pool, snacking on *kazu* and sampling some French wines (all ship grown, but statistically more authentic than the real thing, it assured us. ... No, me neither). I'd been thinking about Linter, and asked a remote drone what contingency plans had been made if it came to the worst.*

'What is the last resort?'

'I don't know; trail him perhaps, watch for a situation where the locals are about to find out he's not one of them — in a hospital, say — then micronuke the place.'

'What?'

'It'd make a great Mystery Explosion story.'

'Be serious.'

'I'm being serious. What's one more meaningless act of violence on that zoo of a planet? It would be appropriate. When in Rome; burn it.'

'You're not really being serious, are you?'

'Sma! Of course not! Are you on something, or what? Good grief, damn the morality of the thing; it would just be so *inelegant*. What do you take me for?' The drone left.

I dangled my feet in the pool. The ship was playing us thirties jazz, in untidied-up form; crackles and hisses left in. It had gone on to that and Gregorian chants after a period — when I'd been in Berlin — of trying to make everybody listen to Stockhausen. I wasn't sorry I'd missed that stage in the ship's constantly altering musical taste.

* Actually, Sma was talking to a ship-slaved tray carrying drinks, but she thinks it sounds silly to say she was talking to a tray. — 'The Drone'

Also while I'd been away, the ship had sent a request, on a postcard, to the BBC's World Service, asking for "Mr David Bowie's 'Space Oddity' for the good ship *Arbitrary* and all who sail in her." (This from a machine that could have swamped Earth's entire electro-magnetic spectrum with whatever the hell it wanted from somewhere beyond Betelgeuse.) It didn't get the request played. The ship thought this was hilarious.

'Here's Dizzy; she'll know.'

I turned round to see Roghres and Djibard Alsahil approaching. They sat down at my side.

Djibard had been friendly with Linter in the year between leaving the *Bad For Business* and finding Earth.

'Hello,' I said. 'Know what?'

'What's happened to Dervley Linter?' Roghres said, trailing one hand in the pool. 'Djib's just back from Tokyo and wanted to see him, but the ship's being awkward; won't say where he is.'

I looked at Djibard, who was sitting cross-legged, looking like a little gnome. She was smiling broadly; she looked stoned.

'What makes you think I know anything?' I said, to Roghres.

'I heard a rumour you'd seen him in Paris.'

'Hmm. Well, yes, I did.' I watched the pretty light patterns the ship was making on the far wall; they were slowly appearing brighter as the main lights went rosy with the ship's evening (which it had gradually brought down to a 24 hour cycle).

'So why hasn't he come back to the ship?' Roghres said. 'He went to Paris right at the start. How come he's still there? Isn't going native is he?'

'I only saw him for a day; less, in fact. I wouldn't like to comment on his mental state ... he seemed happy enough.'

'Don't answer then,' Djibard said, a little slurred.

I looked at Djibard for a moment; she was still smiling. I turned back to Roghres. 'Why not contact him yourselves?'

'Tried that,' Roghres said. She nodded at the other woman. 'Djibard tried on and off-planet. No reply.'

Djibard's eyes were closed now. I looked at Roghres. 'Then he probably doesn't want to talk.'

'You know,' Djibard said, eyes still closed, 'I think it's because we don't mature the way they do. I mean the females have periods, and the men have this *machismo* thing because they've got to do all the things they're supposed to do and so we don't; I mean we don't have things they do ... what I mean is that there are all sorts of things that do things to them, and we don't have that. Them. We don't have them and so we don't get *ground down* the way they do. I think that's the secret. Pressures and knocks and disappointments. I think that's what somebody said to me. But I mean I think it's so unfair. Don't you think it is? I think it's so unfair... but I don't know who for yet; I haven't worked that out, you know?'

I looked at Roghres and she looked at me. Some drugs do turn you into a blabbering moron for the duration.

'I think you know something you're not telling us,' Roghres said. 'And I don't think I'm going to coax it out of you.' She smiled. 'I know; if you don't tell, I'll say to Li that you told me you're secretly in love with him and just playing hard to get. How about that?'

'I'll tell my mum, and she's bigger than yours.'

Roghres laughed. She took Djibard by the hand and they both stood. They moved off, Roghres guiding Djibard, who as she moved away was saying, 'You know, I think it's because we don't mature the way they do. I mean the females — '

A drone carrying empty glasses passed by and muttered, 'Gibbering Djibard,' in English. I smiled, and waggled my feet in the warm water.

4.3: Ablation

I was in Aukland for a couple of weeks, then Edinburgh, then back in the ship again. One or two people asked me about Linter, but obviously word got round that while I probably knew something, I wasn't going to tell anybody. Still, nobody seemed any less friendly because of that.

Meanwhile Li had embarked upon a campaign to get the ship to let him visit Earth without modification. His plan was to go mountain descending; have himself dropped on a summit and then make his way down. He told the ship that this would be perfectly safe security-wise, in the Himalayas at least, because if he was seen people would assume he was a Yeti. The ship said it would think about it (which meant No).

About the middle of June the ship suddenly asked me to go to Oslo for the day. Linter had asked to see me.

A module dropped me in woods near Sandvika in the bright, early morning. I caught a bus to the centre and walked up to the Frogner park. I found the bridge over the river which Linter wanted to use as a rendezvous, and sat on the parapet.

I didn't recognise him at first. I usually recognise people from the way they walk first, and Linter's gait had altered. He looked thinner and more pale; not so physically imposing and immediate. Same suit as in Paris, though it looked baggier on him now, and slightly shabby. He stopped a metre away.

'Hello.' I held out my hand. He shook it, nodded. 'It's good to see you again. How are you keeping?' His voice was weaker sounding, less sure, somehow.

I shook my head, smiling. 'Perfectly well, of course.'
'Oh yes, of course.' He was avoiding my eyes.

He made me feel a little awkward, just standing there, so I slid down off the parapet and stood in front of him. He seemed to be smaller than I remembered. He was rubbing his hands together as though it was cold, and looking up the broad avenue of bizarre Vigoland sculptures in the northern blue-morning sky. 'Do you want to walk?' He asked.

'Yes, let's.' We started across the bridge, towards the first flight of steps on the far side of the obelisk and fountain.

'Thank you for coming.' Linter looked at me, then quickly away.

'That's all right. Pleasant city.' I took off my leather jacket and slung it over my shoulder. I was wearing jeans and boots, but it was a blouse and skirt day really. 'So, how are you getting on?'

'I'm still staying, if that's what you want to know.'
Defensively.

'I assumed you were.'

He relaxed, coughed. We walked across the broad, empty bridge. It was still too early for most people to be up and about, and we seemed to be alone in the park. The severe, square, stone-plinthed lights of the bridge went slowly by, counterpoints to the curves of the strange statues.

'I ... I wanted to give you this.' Linter stopped, felt inside his jacket and brought out what looked like a gold plated Parker pen. He twisted the top off; where the nib should have been there was a grey tube covered in tiny coloured symbols which belonged to no language on Earth. A little red tell-tale winked lazily. It looked insignificant, somehow. He put the top back on the terminal.

'Will you take it?' he said, blinking.

'Yes, if you're sure.'

'I haven't used it for weeks.'

'How did you ask the ship to see me?'

'It sends down drones to talk to me. I offered the terminal to them, but they wouldn't take it. The

ship won't take it. I don't think it wants to be responsible.'

'You want me to be?'

'As a friend. I'd like you to; please. Please take it.'

'Look, why not keep it but don't use it. In case there's some emergency — '

'No. No; just take it, please.' Linter looked into my eyes for a moment. 'It's just a formality.'

I felt a strange urge to laugh, the way he said that. Instead I took the terminal from him and stuffed it into my bomber jacket. Linter sighed. We walked on.

It was a lovely day. The sky was cloudless, the air clear, and fragrant with mixtures of the sea and land. I wasn't sure whether there really was something about that quality of light that made it northern; perhaps it only looked different because you knew there was just a thousand kilometres or so of as clear, still fresher, colder air between you and the Arctic sea, the great bergs and the millions of square kilometres of ice and snow. It was like being on *another* planet.

Yet it was the same planet, and this was the same man.

We walked up the steps, Linter seeming to study each one. I was looking around, drinking in the sight and sound and smell of this place, reminded of my holidays from London.

I looked at the man by my side.

'You know you're not looking too well.'

He didn't meet my gaze, but appeared to study some distant stonework at the end of the walk.

'Well ... no, I guess you could say I've changed.'

He smiled uncertainly. 'I'm not the man I was.'

Something about the way he said it made me shiver.

He was watching his feet again.

'You staying here, in Oslo?' I asked him.

'For the moment, yes. I like it here. It doesn't feel like a capital city; clean and compact, but — ' he broke off, shook his head at something. 'I'll move on soon though, I think.'

We went on, mounting the steps. Some of the Vigoland sculptures made me feel distinctly uncomfortable. A wave of something like revulsion swept over me, startling me; some planetary repugnance in this northern city. In this world now, they were talking of abandoning the B1 bomber to go ahead with the cruise missile. What had started out as the Neutron Bomb had euphemised into the Enhanced Radiation Warhead and finally into the Reduced Blast Device. They're all sick and so's he, I thought suddenly. Infected.

No, that was stupid. I was getting xenophobic. The fault was within, not without.

'Do you mind if I tell you something?'

'What do you mean?' I said. What a weird thing to say, I thought.

'Well you might find it ... distasteful; I don't know.'

'Tell me anyway. I have a strong constitution.'

'I got ... I asked the ship to ah ... alter me.' He looked at me briefly. I inspected him. The slight stoop, the thinness and paler skin wouldn't have required the services of the ship. He saw me looking, shook his head. 'No, nothing outside; inside.'

'Oh. What?'

'Well, I got it to ... to give me a set of guts more like the locals. And I had the drug glands taken out, and the uh — ' he laughed nervously. ' — the loop system in my balls.'

I kept walking. I believed him, immediately. I couldn't believe the ship had agreed to do it, but I believed Linter. I didn't know what to say.

'So, I uh, don't have any choice about going to the toilet every so often, and I ... I had it work on my eyes, too.' He paused. Now it was my turn to keep looking at my feet, clomping up the steps in my fancy Italian climbing boots. I didn't think I wanted to hear this. 'Sort of re-wired so I see like them. Bit fuzzier, sort of less ... well, not less colours, but more sort of ... squashed up. Can't see much at night, either. Same sort of thing on

my ears and nose. But it ... well it almost enhances what you do experience, you know? I'm still glad I had it done.'

'Yeah.' I nodded, not looking at him.

'My immune system isn't perfect anymore, either. I can get colds, and ... that sort of thing. I didn't get the shape of my dick altered; decided it would pass. Did you know there are considerable variations in genitalia here already? The Bushmen of the Kalahari have a permanent erection, and the women have the *Tablier Egyptien*; a small fold of flesh covering their genitals.' He waved one hand. 'So I'm not that much of a freak. I guess this isn't all that terrible really, is it? I don't know why I thought you might be disgusted or anything.'

'Hmm.' I was wondering what had possessed the ship to do all this to the man. It had agreed to carry out these ... I could only think of them as mutilations ... and yet it wouldn't accept his terminal. Why had it done this to him? It said it wanted him to change his mind, but it changed his body instead, pandering to his lunatic desire to become more like the locals.

'Can't change sex now, if I wanted to. Things'll still regrow if they get cut off; ship couldn't alter that, not quickly; take time; intensive care, and it wouldn't alter my ... umm ... clockspeed, what-d'you-call-it. So I'll still grow old slowly, and live longer than them ... but I think it might relent later, when it knows I'm sincere.'

All I could think of was that by converting Linter's physiology to a design closer to the planetary standard, the ship wanted to show the man what a nasty life they led. Perhaps it thought rubbing his nose in the Human Condition would send the man running back to the manifold delights of the ship, content with his Cultural lot at last.

'You don't mind, do you?'

'Mind? Why should I mind?' I said, and instantly felt foolish for sounding like something from a soap opera.

'Yes, I can see you do,' Linter said. 'You think I'm crazy, don't you?'

'All right.' I stopped half way up a flight of steps, turned to him. 'I do. I think you're crazy to ... to throw so much away. It's ... it's wrong-headed of you, it's stupid. It's as if you're doing it just to annoy people, to test the ship. Are you trying to get it mad at you, or what?'

'Of course not, Sma.' He looked hurt. 'I don't care that much about the ship, but I was worried ... I am concerned about what you might think.' He took my free hand in both of his. They felt cold.

'You're a friend. You matter to me. I don't want to offend anybody; not you, not anybody. But I have to do what feels right. This is very important to me; more important than anything else I've ever done before. I don't want to upset anybody, but ... look, I'm sorry.' He let go my hand.

'Yeah, I'm sorry too. But it's like mutilation. Like infection.'

'Ah, we're the infection, Sma.' He turned and sat down on the steps, looking back towards the city and the sea. 'We're the ones who're different, we're the self-mutilated, the self-mutated. This is the mainstream; we're just like very smart kids; infants with a brilliant construction kit. They're real because they live the way they have to. We aren't because we live the way we want to.'

'Linter,' I said, sitting beside him. 'This is the fucking mental home; the land of the midnight brain. This is the place that gave us Mutual Assured Destruction; they've thrown people into boiling water to cure diseases; they use Electro-Convulsive Therapy; a nation with a law against cruel and unusual punishments electrocutes people to death —'

'Go on; mention the death camps,' Linter said, blinking at the blue distance.

'It was never Eden. It isn't ever going to be, but it might progress. You're turning your back on every

advance we've made beyond where they are now, and you're insulting them as well as the Culture.'

'Oh, pardon me.' He rocked forward on his haunches, hugging himself.

'The only way they can go — and survive — is the same way we've come, and you're saying that's all shit. That's refugee mentality, and *they* wouldn't thank you for what you're doing. *They* would say you're crazy.'

He shook his head, hands in his armpits, still staring away. 'Maybe they don't have to take the same route. Maybe they don't need Minds, maybe they don't need more and more technology. They might be able to do it by themselves, without wars and revolutions even ... just by understanding, by some ... belief. By something more natural than we can understand. Naturalness is something they still understand.'

'*Naturalness?*' I said, loudly. 'This lot'll tell you *anything* is natural; they'll tell you greed and hate and jealousy and paranoia and unthinking religious awe and fear of god and hating anybody who's another colour or thinks different is *natural*. Hating blacks or hating whites or hating women or hating men or hating gays; that's *natural*. Dog-eat-dog, looking out for number one, no lame ducks... Shit, they're so convinced about what's natural it's the more sophisticated ones that'll tell you suffering and evil are natural and necessary because otherwise you can't have pleasure and goodness. They'll tell you any one of their rotten stupid systems is the natural and right one, the one true way; what's natural to them is whatever they can use to fight their own grimy corner and fuck everybody else. They're not more natural than us any more than an amoeba is more natural than them just because it's cruder.'

'But Sma, they're living according to their instincts, or trying to. We're so proud of living according to

our conscious beliefs, but we've lost the idea of shame. And we need that too. We need that even more than they do.'

'*What?*' I shouted. I whirled round, took him by the shoulders and shook him. 'We should be *what*? Ashamed of being conscious? Are you crazy? What's wrong with you? How can you say something like that?'

'Just listen! I don't mean they're better; I don't mean we should try to live like them, I mean that they have an idea of ... of light and shade that we don't have. They're proud sometimes, too, but they're ashamed as well; they feel all-conquering and powerful but then they realise how powerless they really are. They know the good in them, but they know the evil in them, too; they recognise both, they *live* with both. We don't have that duality, that balance. And ... and can't you see it might be more fulfilling for one individual — me — who *has* a Culture background, who *is* aware of all life's possibilities, to live in this society, not the Culture?'

'So you find this ... hellhole more fulfilling?'

'Yes, of course I do. Because there's — because it's just so ... alive. In the end, they're right Sma; it doesn't really matter that a lot of what's going on is what we — or even they — might call "bad"; it's happening, it's there, and that's what matters, that's what makes it worthwhile to be here and be part of it.'

I took my hands off his shoulders. 'No. I don't understand you. Dammit Linter, you're more alien than they are. At least they have an excuse. God, you're the fucking mythical recent convert, aren't you? The fanatic. The zealot. I'm sorry for you, man.'

'Well ... thank you.' He looked to the sky, blinking again. 'I didn't want you to understand me too quickly, and — ' he made a noise that was not quite a laugh. ' — I don't think you are, are you?'

'Don't give me that pleading look,' I shook my head, but I couldn't stay angry with him looking like that.

Something subsided in me, and I saw a sort of shy smile steal over Linter's face. 'I am not,' I said, 'going to make this easy for you Dervley. You're making a mistake. The biggest you'll ever make in your life. You'd better realise you're on your own. Don't think a few plumbing changes and a new set of bowel bacteria are going to make you any closer to *homo sapiens*, either.'

'You're a friend, Diziet. I'm glad you're concerned ... but I think I know what I'm doing.'

It was time for me to shake my head again, so I did. Linter held my hand while we walked back down to the bridge and then out of the park. I felt sorry for him because he seemed to have realised his own loneliness. We walked round the city for a while, then went to his apartment for lunch. His place was in a modern block down towards the harbour, not far from the massiveness of the city hall; a bare flat with white walls and little furniture. It hardly looked lived in at all save for a few late Lowry reproductions and sketches by Holbein.

It had clouded over in late morning. I left after lunch. I think he expected me to stay, but I only wanted to get back to the ship.

4.4: God Told Me To Do It

- < 'Why did I do what?'
- 'What you did to Linter. Alter him. Revert him.'
- 'Because he asked me to do it,' the ship said. I was standing in the top hangar deck. I'd waited till I was back on the ship before I confronted it, via a remote drone.
- 'And of course it had nothing to do with hoping he might dislike the feeling so much he'd come back into the fold. Nothing to do with trying to shock him with the pain of being human when the locals have at least had the advantage of growing up with it and getting used to the idea. Nothing to do with letting him inflict a physical and mental torture on himself so you could sit back and say "I told you so" after he came crying to you to take him back.'
- 'Well as a matter of fact, no. You obviously believe I altered Linter for my own ends. That's not true. I did what I did because Linter requested it. Certainly I tried to talk him out of it, but when I was convinced that he meant what he said and he knew what he was doing and what it entailed, and when I couldn't reasonably decide he was mad, I did what he asked.
- 'It did occur to me he might not enjoy the feeling of being something close to human-basic, but I thought it was obvious from what he'd said when we were talking it over beforehand that he didn't expect to enjoy it. He knew it would be unpleasant, but he regarded it as a form of birth, or rebirth. I thought it unlikely he would be so unprepared for the experience, and so shocked by it, that he would want to be returned to his genofixed norm, and even less likely that he would go on from there to abandoning his idea of staying on Earth altogether.
- 'I'm a little disappointed in you Sma. I thought you would understand me. One's object in trying to be scrupulously fair and even-handed is not to seek praise, I'm sure, but one would hope that

having done something more honest than convenient, one's motives would not be questioned in such an overtly suspicious manner. I could have refused Linter's request; I could have claimed that I found the idea unpleasant and didn't want to have anything to do with it. I could have built a perfectly adequate defence on aesthetic distaste alone; but I didn't.

'Three reasons: One; I'd have been lying. I don't find Linter any more repellent or disgusting than I did before. What matters is his mind; his intellect and the state it's in. Physiological details are largely irrelevant. Certainly his body is less efficient than it was before; less sophisticated, less damage-resistant, less flexible over a given range of conditions than, say, yours ... but he's living in the Twentieth Century West, and at a comparatively privileged economic level; he doesn't *have* to have brilliant reflexes or better night-sight than an owl. So his integrity as a conscious entity is less affected by all the alterations I've carried out on him than it already was by the very decision to stay on Earth in the first place.

'Two; if anything is going to convince Linter we're the good guys, it's being fair and reasonable even when he might not be being so. To turn on him because he's not doing just as I would like, or just as any of us might like, would be to force him further into the idea that Earth is his home, humanity his kin.

'Three; — and this would be sufficient reason by itself — what are we supposed to be about, Sma? What is the Culture? What do we believe in, even if it hardly ever is expressed, even if we are embarrassed about talking about it? Surely in freedom, more than anything else. A relativistic, changing sort of freedom, unbounded by laws or laid-down moral codes, but — in the end — just because it is so hard to pin down and express, a freedom of a far higher quality than anything to be found on any relevant scale on the planet beneath us at the moment.

'The same technological expertise, the same productive surplus which, in pervading our society, first allows us to be here at all and after that allows us the degree of choice we have over what happens to Earth, long ago also allowed us to live exactly as we wish to live, limited only by being expected to respect the same principle applied to others. And *that's* so basic that not only does every religion on Earth have some similar form of words in its literature, but almost every religion, philosophy or other belief system ever discovered anywhere else contains the same concept. It is the embedded achievement of that oft-expressed ideal that our society is — perversely — rather embarrassed about. We live with, use, simply *get on* with our freedom as much as the good people of Earth talk about it; and we talk about it as often as genuine examples of this shy concept can be found down there.

'Dervley Linter is as much a product of our society as I am, and as such, or at least until he can be proved to be in some real sense "mad", he's perfectly correct in expecting to have his wishes fulfilled. Indeed the very fact he asked for such an alteration — and accepted it from me — may prove his thinking is still more Culture- than Earth- influenced.

'In short, even if I had thought that I had sound tactical reasons for refusing his request, I'd have had just as difficult a job justifying such an action as I would have had I just snapped the guy off-planet the instant I realised what he was thinking. I can only be sure in myself that I am in the right in trying to get Linter to come back if I am positive that my own behaviour — as the most sophisticated entity involved — is beyond reproach, and in as close accord with the basic principles of our society as it is within my power to make it.'

I looked at the drone's sensing band. I'd stood stock still during all this, unreacting. I sighed.

'Well,' I said. 'I don't know; that sounds almost ... noble.' I folded my arms. 'Only trouble is, ship, that I can never tell when you're on the level and when you're talking just for the sake of it.' >
The unit stayed where it was for a couple of seconds, then turned and glided off, without saying another word.

4.5: Credibility Problem

The next time I saw Li, he was wearing a uniform just like Captain Kirk's in *Star Trek*.

'Well, what on earth,' I laughed.

'Don't mock, alien,' Li scowled.

I was reading *Faust* in German and watching two of my friends playing snooker. The gravity in the snooker room was a little less than standard, to make the balls roll right. I'd asked the ship (when it was still talking to me) why it hadn't reduced its internal G to Earth's average, as it had done with its day-night cycle. 'Oh, it would have meant too much recalibration,' the ship had said.

'I couldn't be bothered.' How's that for God-like omnipotence?

'You won't have heard,' Li said, sitting beside me, 'having being on EVA, but I'm intending to become captain of this tub.'

'Are you really? Well that's fascinating.' I didn't ask him what or where the hell EVA was. 'And how exactly do you propose attaining this elevated, not to say unlikely position?'

'I'm not sure yet,' Li admitted, 'but I think I have all the qualifications for the post.'

'Consider the liminal cue given; I know you're going to —'

'Bravery, resourcefulness, intelligence, the ability to handle men — and women — ; a razor sharp wit and lightning fast reactions. Also loyalty and the ability to be ruthlessly objective when the safety of my ship and crew are at stake. Except, of course, when the safety of the Universe as we know it is at stake, in which case I would reluctantly have to consider making a brave and noble sacrifice. Naturally, should such a situation ever arise, I'd try to save the officers and crew who serve beneath me. I'd go down with the ship, of course.'

'Of course. Well, that's —'

'Wait; there's another quality I haven't mentioned yet.'

'Are there any left?'

'Certainly. Ambition.'

'Silly of me. Of course.'

'It will not have escaped your attention that until now nobody ever thought of wanting to become captain of the *Arb*.'

'A perhaps understandable lapse.' Jhavins, one of my friends, brought off a fine cut on the black ball, and I applauded. 'Good shot.'

Li prodded my shoulder. 'Listen properly.'

'I'm listening, I'm listening.'

'The point is that my wanting to become Captain, I mean even thinking of the idea, means that I *should be* the captain, understand?'

'Hmm.' Jhavins was lining up an unlikely cannon on a distant red.

Li made an exasperated noise. 'You're humouring me; I thought *you* at least would argue. You're just like everybody else.'

'Ah,' I said. Jhavins hit the red, but just left it hanging over the pocket. I looked at Li. 'An argument? All right; you — anybody — taking command of the ship is like a flea taking over control of a human ... maybe even like a bacteria in their saliva taking them over.'

'But why should it command itself? We made it; it didn't make us.'

'So? And anyway we didn't make it; other machines made it ... and even they only started it off; it mostly made itself. But anyway, you'd have to go back ... I don't know how many thousand generations of its ancestors before you found the last computer or space ship built directly by any of our ancestors. Even if this mythical "we" had built it, it's still zillions of times smarter than we are. Would you let an ant tell you what to do?'

'Bacterium? flea? Ant? Make up your mind.'

'Oh go away and de-scale a mountain or something, you silly man.'

'But we started all this; if it hadn't been for us — '

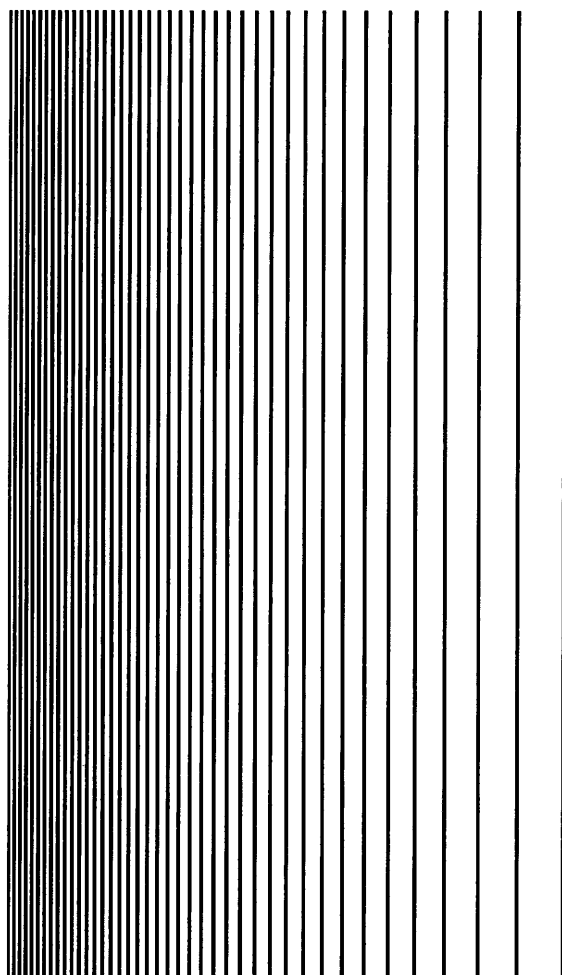
'And who started us? Some glop of goo on another rock-ball? A super-nova? The big bang? What's *starting* something got to do with it?'

'You don't think I'm serious, do you?'

'More terminal than serious.'

'You wait,' Li said, standing up and wagging a finger at me. 'I'll be captain one day. And you'll be sorry; I had you down tentatively as science officer, but now you'll be lucky to make nurse in the sickbay.'

'Ah, away and piss on your dilithium crystals.'



5: You Would If You Really Loved Me

5.1: Sacrificial Victim

I stayed on the ship for a few weeks after that. It started talking to me again after a couple of days. I forgot about Linter for a while; everybody on the *Arbitrary* seemed to be talking about new films or old films or books, or about what was happening in Kampuchea, or about Lanyares Sodel, who was off fighting with the Eritreans. Lanyares used to live on a plate where he and some of his pals played games of soldiers using live kinetic ammunition. I recalled hearing about this and being appalled; even with medical gear standing by and a full supply of drug glands it sounded slightly perverse, and when I'd found out they didn't have anything to protect their heads, I'd decided these guys were crazy. You could have your brains splattered over the landscape! You could *die*!

But they enjoyed the fear, I suppose. I'm told some people do.

Anyway, Lanyares told the ship he wanted to take part in some real fighting. The ship tried to talk him out of it, but failed, so sent him down to Ethiopia. It tracked him by satellite and tailed him with scout missiles, ready to zap him back to the ship if he was badly wounded. After some badgering, and having obtained Lanyares's permission, the ship put the view from the missiles trailing him onto an accessible channel, so anybody could watch. I thought this was in even more dubious taste.

It didn't last. After about ten days Lanyares got fed up because there wasn't much happening and so he had himself taken back up to the ship. He didn't mind the discomfort, he said, in fact it was almost pleasant in a masochistic sort of way, and certainly made shipboard life seem more attractive. But the rest had been so *boring*. Having a good ring-ding battle on a plate landscape designed for the purpose was much

more fun. The ship told him he was silly and packed him back off to Rio de Janeiro to be a properly-behaved culture-vulture again. Anyway, it could have sent him to Kampuchea. I suppose; altered him to make him look Cambodian and thrown him into the middle of the butchery of Year Zero. Somehow I don't think that was quite what Lanyares had been looking for though.

I travelled around more of Britain, East Germany and Austria when I wasn't on the *Arbitrary*. The ship tried me in Pretoria for a few days, but I really couldn't take it; perhaps if it had sent me there first I'd have been all right, but after nine months of Earth maybe even my Cultured nerves were getting frayed, and the land of Separate Development was just too much for me. I asked the ship about Linter a few times, but only received All-Purpose Non-Committal Reply Number 63a, or whatever, so after a bit I stopped asking.

'What is beauty?'

'Oh ship, really.'

'No, I'm being serious. We have a disagreement here.'

I stood in Frankfurt am Main, on a suspension foot-bridge over the river, talking to the ship via my terminal. One or two people looked at me as they walked by, but I wasn't in the mood to care.

'All right, then. Beauty is something that disappears when you try to define it.'

'I don't think you really believe that. Be serious.'

'Look ship, I already know what the disagreement is. I believe that there is something, however difficult to define, which is shared by everything beautiful and cannot be signified by any other single word without obscuring more than is made clear. You think that beauty lies in utility.'

'Well, more or less.'

'So where's Earth's utility?'

'Its utility lies in being a living machine. It forces people to act and react. At that it is close to the theoretical limits of efficiency for a non-conscious system.'

'You sound like Linter. A living machine, indeed.'

'Linter is not totally wrong, but he is like somebody who has found an injured bird and kept it past the time it is recovered, out of a protectiveness he would not like to admit is centred on himself, not the animal. Well, there may be nothing more we can do for Earth, and it's time to let go ... in this case it's we who have to fly away, but you see what I mean.'

'But you agree with Linter there is something beautiful about Earth, something aesthetically positive no Culture environment could match?'

'Yes, I do. Few things are all gain. All we have ever done is maximise what happens to be considered "good" at any particular time. Despite what the locals may think, there is nothing intrinsically illogical or impossible about having a genuine, functioning Utopia, or removing badness without removing goodness, or pain without pleasure, or excitement without boredom ... but on the other hand there is nothing to say that you can always fix things up just the way you want them without running up against the occasional problem. We have removed almost all the bad in our environment, but we have not quite kept all the good. Averaged out, we're still way ahead, but we do have to yield to humans in some fields, and in the end of course theirs is a more interesting environment. Naturally so.'

'"May you live in interesting times."'

'Quite.'

'I can't agree. I can't see the utility or the beauty in that. All I'll give you is that it might be a relevant stage to go through.'

'Might be the same thing. A slight time-problem perhaps. You just happen to be here now.'

'As are they all.'

I turned round and looked at a few of the people walking by. The autumn sun was low in the sky, a vivid red disc, dusty and gaseous and the colour of blood, and rubbed into these well-fed Western faces in an image of a poison-price. I looked them in the eyes, but they looked away; I felt like taking them by the collar and shaking them, screaming at them, telling them what they were doing wrong, telling them what was happening; the plotting militaries, the commercial frauds, the smooth corporate and governmental lies, the holocaust taking place in Kampuchea ... and telling them too what was possible, how close they were, what they could do if they just got their planetary act together ... but what was the point? I stood and looked at them, and found myself — half involuntarily — glancing slow, so that suddenly they all seemed to be moving in slow-motion, trailing past as though they were actors in a movie, and seen on a dodgy print that kept varying between darkness and graininess. 'What hope for these people, ship?' I heard myself murmur, voice slurred. It must have sounded like a squawk to anybody else. I turned away from them, looking down at the river.

'Their children's children will die before you even look old, Diziet. Their grandparents are younger than you are now... In your terms, there is no hope for them. In theirs, every hope.'

'And we're going to use the poor bastards as a control group.'

'We're probably just going to watch, yes.'

'Sit back and do nothing.'

'Watching is a form of doing. And, we aren't taking anything away from them. It'll be as if we were never here.'

'Apart from Linter.'

'Yes,' sighed the ship. 'Apart from Mr Problem.'

'Oh ship, can't we at least stop them on the brink? If they do press the button, couldn't we junk the missiles when they're in flight, once they've had

their chance to do it their way and blown it ...
couldn't we come in then? It would have served
its purpose as a control by then.'

'Diziet, you know that's not true. We're talking about
the next ten thousand years at least, not the
lead time to the Third World War. Being able to
stop it isn't the point; it's whether in the very long
result it is the right thing to do.'

'Great,' I whispered to the swirling dark waters of the
Main. 'So how many infants have to grow up
under shadow of the mushroom cloud, and just
possibly die screaming inside the radioactive
rubble, just for us to be sure we're doing the right
thing? How certain do we have to be? How long
must we wait? How long must we make *them*
wait? Who elected us God?'

'Diziet,' the ship said, its voice sorrowful, 'that question
is being asked all the time, and put in as many
different ways as we have the wit to devise ...
and that moral equation is being re-assessed
every nano-second of every day of every
year, and every time we find some place like
Earth — no matter what way the decision
goes — we come closer to knowing the truth.
But we can never be absolutely certain.
Absolute certainty isn't even a choice on the
menu, most times.' There was a pause.
Footsteps came and went behind me on the
bridge.

'Sma,' the ship said finally, with a hint of what might
have been frustration in its voice, 'I'm the
smartest thing for a hundred light years radius,
and by a factor of about a million ... but even I
can't predict where a snooker ball's going to
end up after more than six collisions.'

I snorted, could almost have laughed.

'Well,' the ship said, 'I think you'd better be on your
way now.'

'Oh?'

'Yes. A passer-by has reported a woman on the
bridge, talking to herself and looking at the
water. A policeman is on his way to investigate,

probably already wondering how cold the water is, and so I think you should turn to your left and walk smartly away before he arrives.'

'Right you are,' I said. I shook my head as I walked off in the dusk light. 'Funny old world, isn't it, ship?' I said, more to myself than to it.

The ship said nothing. The suspended bridge, big as it was, responded to my stepping feet, moving up and down at me like some monstrous and clumsy lover.

5.2: Not Wanted On Voyage

Back on the ship.

For a few hours the *Arbitrary* had left the world's snowflakes unmolested, and gone collecting other samples at Li's request.

The first time Li saw me on the ship he'd come up to me and whispered, 'Take him to see *The Man Who Fell To Earth*,' and slunk off. The next time I saw him he claimed it was the first time and I must be hallucinating if I thought we'd met before. A fine way to greet a friend and admirer, claiming he'd been going about whispering cryptic messages...

So; one moonless, November night, darkside over the Tarim Basin...

Li was giving a dinner party.

He was still trying to become captain of the *Arbitrary*, but he seemed to have his ideas about rank and democracy mixed up, because he thought the best way to become 'skipper' was to get us all to vote for him. So this was going to be a campaign dinner.

We sat in the lower hangar space, surrounded by our hardware. There were about two hundred people gathered in the hangar; everybody still on the ship was present, and many had come back off-planet just for the occasion. Li had us all sit ourselves round three giant tables, each two metres broad and at least twenty times that in length. He'd insisted they should be proper tables, and complete with chairs and place settings and all the rest, and the ship had reluctantly filched a small Sequoia and done all the carving and turning and whatever to produce the tables and everything that went with them. To compensate, it had planted several hundred oaks in its upper hangar, using its own stored biomass as a growing medium; it would plant the saplings on Earth before it left.

When we were all seated, and had started talking amongst ourselves — I was sitting between Roghres and Ghemada — the lights around us dimmed, and a spotlight picked out Li, walking out of the darkness. We all sat back or craned forward, watching him.

There was much laughter. Li had greenish skin, pointed ears, and wore a 2007 style space suit with a zig-zag silver flash added across the chest (held on by micro-rivets, he told me later). He sported a long red cape which flowed out behind from his shoulders. He held the suit helmet in the crook of his left arm. In his right hand he gripped a *Star Wars* light sword. Of course, the ship had made him a *real* one.

Li walked purposefully to the head of the middle table, tramped on an empty seat at its head and strode onto the table top, clumping down the brightly polished surface between the glittering place settings (the cutlery had been borrowed from a locked and forgotten storeroom in a palace on a lake in India; it hadn't been used for fifty years, and would be returned, cleaned, the next day ... as would the dinner service itself, borrowed for the night from the Sultan of Brunei — without his permission), past the starched white napkins (from the Titanic; they'd be cleaned too and put back on the floor of the Atlantic), in the midst of the glittering glassware (Edinburgh Crystal, removed for a few hours from packing cases stowed deep in the hold of a freighter in the South China Sea, bound for Yokohama) and the candelabrae (from a cache of loot lying under a lake near Kiev, sunk there by retreating Nazis judging from the sacks; also due to be replaced after their bizarre orbital excursion) until he stood in the centre of the middle table, maybe two metres from where I, Roghres and Ghemada sat.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' Li shouted, arms outstretched, helmet in one hand, sword humming brightly in the other. 'The food of Earth! Eat!'

He assumed a dramatic pose, pointing the sword back up the table, gazing heroically along its green glowing length and leaning forward, one knee bending. The ship either manipulated its gravity field or Li had an AG harness under the suit, because he rose silently from the table and drifted along above it (holding the pose) to the far end, where he dropped gracefully and sat in the seat he'd used earlier as a step. There was scattered applause and some hooting.

Meanwhile, dozens of drones and slaved trays had made their way out of the elevator shaft and approached the tables, bringing food.

We ate. It was all ethnic food, though not actually brought up from the planet; vat grown ship food, though not a gourmet on Earth could have spotted any difference between our stuff and the real thing. From what I could see, Li had used the *Guinness Book of Records* as his wine list. The ship's copies of the wines involved were so good — we were told — that the ship itself couldn't have told them apart from the real thing.

We chomped and gurgled our way through an eclectic but relatively orthodox series of courses, chatting and fooling, and wondering whether Li had anything else planned; this all seemed disappointingly conventional. Li came round, asking how we were enjoying the meal, refilling our glasses, suggesting we try different dishes, saying he hoped he could count on our vote on election day, and sidestepping awkward questions about the Prime Directive.

Finally, much later, maybe a dozen courses later, when we were all sitting there bloated and content and mellow and sipping on our brandies and whiskies, we got Li's campaign speech ... plus a dainty dish to set before the Culture.

I was a little drowsy. Li had come round with huge Havana cigars, and I'd taken one, and let the drug get to me. I was sitting there, puffing

determinedly on the fat drug-stick, surrounded by a cloud of smoke, wondering what the natives saw in a tobacco high, but otherwise feeling just fine, when Li banged on the table with the pommel of the light sword and then climbed up and stood where his place setting had been (bang went one of the Sultan's plates, but I suspect the ship managed to repair it). The lights went out, leaving one spot on Li.

I used some *snap* to clear the sleepiness and stubbed the cigar out.

* 'Ladies and gentlemen,' Li said in passable English, before continuing in Marain. 'I have gathered you here this evening to talk to you about Earth and what should be done with it. It is my hope and wish that after you've heard what I have to say you will agree with me on the only possible course of action ... but first of all, let me say a few words about myself.' There were jeers and cat-calls as Li bent and took up his glass of brandy. He drained the glass and threw it over his shoulder. A drone must have caught it in the shadows because I didn't hear it land.

'First of all,' Li rubbed his chin, stroking the long hair. 'Who am I?' He ignored a variety of shouts telling him 'a total fucking idiot', and the like, and continued. 'I am Grice-Thantapsa Li Brase 'ndane dam Sione; I am one hundred and seventeen years old, but wise beyond my years. I have been in Contact only six years, but I have experienced much in that time, and so can speak with some authority on Contact matters. I am the product of perhaps eight thousand years of progress beyond the stage of the planet that lies beneath our feet.' (Cries of 'Not much to show for it, huh?', etc.) 'I can track my ancestry back by name for at least that amount of time, and if you went back to the first dim glimmerings of sentience and you could end up

* The following speech — sourced from the *Arbitrary's* own files — has been rendered as accurately as possible. Mr 'ndane's grammatical eccentricities are difficult to reproduce in English. — 'The Drone'

going back — ‘(‘last week?’ ‘your mother’)
 — through tens of thousands of generations.
 ‘My body is altered, of course; tuned to a high pitch
 of efficiency in terms of survivability and
 pleasure, — ‘(‘don’t worry, it doesn’t show’)
 — and just as I inherited that alteration, so shall
 I pass it on to any children of my own.’ (‘please,
 Li; we’ve just eaten.’) ‘We have remade
 ourselves just as we have made our machines;
 we can fairly claim to be largely our own work.
 ‘However; in my head, literally inside my skull, in my
 brain, I am potentially as stupid as the most
 recently born babe in the most deprived area
 on Earth.’ He paused, smiling, to let the cat-calls
 subside. ‘We are who we are as much because
 of what we experience and are taught as we
 grow — the way we are brought up, in other
 words — as we are because we inherit the
 general appearance of pan-humanism, the
 more particular traits associated with the Culture
 meta-species, and the precise genetic mix
 contributed by our parents, including all those
 wonderful tinkered-with bits.’ (‘tinker with your
 own bits, laddy.’)
 ‘So if I can claim to be morally superior to some
 denizen of those depths of atmosphere
 beneath us, it is because that is the way I was
 brought up. We are truly raised; they are
 squashed, trimmed, trained, made into *bonsai*.
 Theirs is a civilisation of deprivation; ours of finely
 balanced satisfaction ever teetering on the
 brink of excess. The Culture could afford to let
 me be whatever it was within my personal
 potential to become; so, for good or ill, I am
 fulfilled.
 ‘Consider; I think I can truthfully claim to be a more-or-
 less average Culture person, as can all of us
 here. Certainly, we’re in Contact, so we might
 be a little more interested in travelling abroad
 and meeting people than the mean, but in
 general terms any one of us could be picked at
 random and represent the Culture quite

adequately; the choice of who you would pick to fairly represent Earth I leave to your imagination.

'But back to me; I am as rich and as poor as anybody in the Culture (I use these words because it's to Earth I want to compare our present position). Rich: trapped as I am on board this uncaptained, leaderless tub, my wealth may not be very obvious, but it would seem immense to the average Earther. At home I have the run of a charming and beautiful Orbital which would seem very clean and uncrowded to somebody from Earth; I have unlimited access to the free, fast, safe and totally dependable underplate transport system; I live in a wing of a family home of mansion proportions surrounded by hectares of gorgeous gardens, I have an aircraft, a launch, the choice of mount from a large stable of *aphores*;^{*} even the use of what would be called a space ship by these people, plus a wide choice of deep space cruisers. As I say, I'm constrained at the moment by being in Contact, but of course I could leave at any moment, and within months be home, with another two hundred years or more of carefree life to look forward to; and all for nothing; I don't have to do anything for all this.

'But, at the same time, I am poor. I own nothing. Just as every atom in my body was once part of something else, in fact part of many different things, and just as the elementary particles were themselves part of other patterns before they came together to form the atoms that make up the magnificent physical and mental specimen you see standing so impressively before you ... yes, thank you ... and just as one day every atom of my being will one day be part of something else — a star, initially, because that is

^{*} I thought the phonetic equivalent was better than something strained like "horsoid". — 'The Drone'

the way we choose to bury our dead — again, so everything around me, from the food that I eat and the drink that I drink and the figurine that I carve and the house I inhabit and the clothes I wear so elegantly ... to the module I ride to the Plate that I stand on and the star that warms me is there *when* I am there rather than *because* I am. These things may be arranged for me, but in that sense I only happen to be me, and they would be there for anybody else — should they desire them — too. I do not — emphatically *not* — own them.

'Now, on Earth things are not quite the same. On Earth one of the things that a large proportion of the locals is most proud of is this wonderful economic system which, with a sureness and certainty so comprehensive one could almost imagine the process bears some relation to their limited and limiting notions of either thermodynamics or God, all food, comfort, energy, shelter, space, fuel and sustenance gravitates naturally and easily away from those who need it most and towards those who need it least. Indeed, those on the receiving end of such *largesse* are often harmed unto death by its arrival, though the effects may take years and generations to manifest themselves.

'To combat this insidious and disgusting travesty of sensible human social relationships on a truly fundamental level was patently impossible on an infested dunghill like Earth, so deprived as it obviously was of meaningful genetic choice at a fundamental level and therefore philosophical options on a more accessible scale, and it became obvious — through the perverse logic inherent in the species and the process they had entailed — that the only way to react to such a system that had any chance of making it worse, and conditions that much less bearable, was to accept it on its own terms: go into competition with it!

'Now, quite apart from the fact that, from the point of view of the Earther, socialism suffers the devastating liability of only exhibiting internal contradictions when you are trying to use it as an adjunct to your own stupidity (unlike capitalism, which again, from the point of view of the Earther, happily has them built in from the start), it is the case that because Free Enterprise got there first and set up the house rules, it will always stay at least one kick ahead of its rivals. Thus, while it takes Soviet Russia a vast amount of time and hard work to produce one inspired lunatic like Lysenko, the West can so arrange things that even the dumbest farmer can see it makes more sense to burn his grain, melt his butter and wash away the remains of his pulped vegetables with his tanks of unused wine than it does to actually sell the stuff to be consumed.

'And note that even if this mythical yokel did decide to sell the stuff, or even give it away — the Earthers have an even more devastating trick they can perform; they show you that those foods aren't even needed anyway! They wouldn't feed the least productive, most unimportant untouchable from Pradesh, tribesperson from Darfur or peon from Rio Branco! The Earth has more than enough to feed all its inhabitants every day *already*! A truth so seemingly world-shattering one wonders that the oppressed of Earth don't rise up in flames and anger yesterday! But they don't, because they are so infected with the myth of self-interested advancement, or the poison of religious acceptance, they either only want to make their own way up the pile so they can shit upon everybody else, or actually feel grateful for the attention when their so-called betters shit on them!

'It is my contention that this is either an example of the most formidable and blissfully arrogant use of power and existing advantage ... or scarcely credible stupidity.

'Now then. Suppose we make ourselves known to this ghastly rabble; what happens?' Li stretched his arms out, and looked round us all just long enough to get a few people starting to answer him back, then roared on; 'I'll tell you what! They won't believe us! Oh, so we have moving maps of the galaxy accurate to a millimetre contained in something the size of a sugar cube, oh so we can make Orbitals and Rings and get across the galaxy in a year and make bombs too small to see that could tear their planet apart...' Li sneered, let one hand flap limp. 'Nothing. These people expect time travel, telepathy, matter transmission. Yes, we can say, "Well, we do have a very limited form of prescience through the use of anti-matter at the boundary of the energy grid which lets us see nearly a millisecond into ..." or "Well, we usually train our minds in a way not entirely compatible with natural telepathic empathy, such as it is, but see this machine here...? Well, if you ask it nicely ..." or "Well, displacing isn't quite transmission of matter, but ..." They will laugh us out of the UN building; especially when they discover we haven't even got out of our home galaxy yet ... unless you count the Clouds, but I doubt they would. And anyway; what is the Culture as a society compared to what they expect? They expect capitalists in space, or an empire. A utopian communistic society? Equality? Liberty? Fraternity? This is not so much old-fashioned stuff as simply unfashionable stuff. Their warped minds have taken them away on an evaporatingly stupid side track off the main sequence of social evolution, and we are probably more alien than they are capable of understanding.

'So, the ship thinks we should just sit and *watch* this pack of genocidal buffoons for the next few millennia?' Li shook his head, wagged one

* (See; I told you. — 'The Drone')

finger. 'I think not. I have a better idea, and I shall put it into effect as soon as I am elected captain. But now,' he raised his hands and clapped. 'The sweet course.'

The drones and units reappeared, holding small steaming bowls of meat. Li topped up a few of the glasses nearest him and urged everybody else to refill their own as the final course was distributed. I'd just about filled myself up on the cheeses, but after Li's speech I seemed to have a bit more room. Still, I was glad my bowl was small. The aroma coming off the meat was quite pleasant, but I didn't think, somehow, it was an Earth dish.

'Meat as a sweet dish?' Roghres said, sniffing the gently steaming bowl. 'Hmm; smells sweet, certainly.'

'Shit,' Tel Ghemada said prodding at her own bowl, 'I know what this is...'

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Li said, standing with a bowl in one hand and a silver fork in the other. 'A little taste of Earth ... no; more than that: a chance for you to participate in the rough and tumble of living on a squalid backwater planet without actually having to leave your seat or get your feet dirty.' He stabbed a bit of the meat, put it in his mouth, chewed and swallowed. 'Human flesh, ladies and gents; cooked muscle of *hom. sap.* ... as I suspect a few of you might have guessed. A little on the sweet side for my palate, but quite acceptable. Eat up.'

I shook my head. Roghres snorted. Tel put her spoon down. I sampled some of Li's unusual dish while he continued. 'I had the ship take a few cells from a variety of people on Earth. Without their knowledge, of course.' He waved the sword vaguely at the table behind us. 'Most of you over there will be eating either Stewed Idi Amin or General Pinochet Chile Con Carne; here in the centre we have a combination of General Stroessner Meat Balls and Richard Nixon Burgers. The rest of you have Ferdinand Marcos Sauté

and Shah of Iran Kebabs. There are, in addition, scattered bowls of Fricaséed Kim Il Sung, Boiled General Videla, and Ian Smith in Black Bean Sauce ... all done just right by the excellent — if leaderless — chef we have around us. Eat up! Eat up!’

We ate up, most of us quite amused. One or two thought the idea a little too outré, and some affected boredom because they thought Li needed discouragement not accomplices, while a few were just too full already. But the majority laughed and ate, comparing tastes and textures.

‘If they could see us now,’ Roghres giggled.

‘Cannibals from outer space!’

When we were mostly done, Li stood on the table again and clapped his hands above his head. ‘Listen! Listen! Here’s what I’ll do if you make me captain!’ The noise died away slowly, but there was still a fair amount of chattering and laughter. Li raised his voice. ‘Earth is a silly and boring planet. If not, then it is too deeply unpleasant to be allowed to exist! Dammit, there’s something *wrong* with those people! They are beyond redemption and hope! They are *not* very bright, they are incredibly bigoted, and unbe-fucking-lievably cruel, both to their own kind and any other species that has the misfortune to stray within range, which of course these days means damn nearly every species; and they’re slowly but determinedly fucking up the entire planet...’ Li shrugged and looked momentarily defensive. ‘Not a particularly exciting or remarkable planet, for a life-sustainer type, true, but it’s still a planet, it is quite pretty, and the principle remains. Frighteningly dumb or majestically evil, I suggest there is only one way to deal with this incontestably neurotic and clinically insane species, and that is to destroy the planet!’

Li looked round at this point, waiting to be interrupted, but nobody was rising to the bait. Those of us not distracted by the drink, whatever drugs, or each

other, just sat smiling indulgently and waited to see what Li's next crazy idea was. He went on. 'Now, I know this might seem a little extreme to some of you — ' (cries of 'no no', 'bit lenient if you ask me', 'wimp!' and 'yeah; nuke the fuckers') ' — and more importantly *very messy*, but I have talked it over with the ship, and it informs me that the best method from my point of view is actually quite elegant, as well as extremely effective.

'All we do is drop a micro black hole into the centre of the planet. Simple as that; no untidy debris left floating about, no big, vulgar flash, and, if we do it right, no upsetting the rest of the solar system. It takes longer than displacing a few tonnes of CAM into the core, but even that has the advantage of giving the humans time to reflect on their past follies, as their world is eaten away beneath them. In the end, all you'd have left is something about the size of a large pea in the same orbit as the Earth, and a minor amount of X-ray pollution from meteoric material. Even the moon could stay where it is. A rather unusual planetary sub-system, but — in terms of scale as much as anything else — a fitting monument, or memorial — ' (Here Li smiled at me. I winked back.) ' — to one of the more boringly inept rabbles marring the face of our fair galaxy.

'Couldn't we just wipe the place clear with a virus, I hear you ask? But no. While it is true that the humans have still done *relatively* little damage to their planet so far — from a distance it still looks fine — it is still the case that the place has been contaminated. Even if we wiped all human life off the rockball, people would still look down at the thing and shiver, recalling the pathetic but fiercely self-destructive monsters that once stalked its surface. However ... even memories find it difficult to haunt a singularity.'

Li stuck the point of the light sword into the top of the table and made to lean on the pommel; the wood flared and burned, and the sword started

to drill through the flaming redwood in a cloud of smoke. Li pulled the sword out, shoved it in its scabbard and repeated the manoeuvre while somebody poured a small fortune in wine over the burning wood. ('Did they have scabbards?') Roghres asked, puzzled. 'I thought they just turned it off...' The resulting steam and fumes rose dramatically around Li as he leant on the pommel of the sword and looked seriously and sincerely at all of us. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he nodded, grim faced. 'This, I submit, is the only solution; a genocide to end all genocides. We have to destroy the planet in order to save it. Should you decide to do me the honour of electing me as your ruler, to serve you, I shall set about putting this plan into immediate effect, and shortly Earth, and all its problems, will cease to exist. Thank you.'

Li bowed, turned, stepped down and sat.

Those of us who'd still been listening clapped, and eventually more or less everybody joined in. There were a few fairly irrelevant questions about stuff like accretion disks, lunar tidal forces and conservation of angular momentum, but after Li had done his best to answer those, Roghres, Tel, Djibard and I went to the head of the table, lifted Li up, carried him down the length of the table to the sound of cheers, took him into the lower accommodation level, and threw him in the pool. Fused the light sabre, but I don't think the ship ever meant to leave Li with something that dangerous to wave around anyway.

We finished the fun off on a remote beach in Western Australia in the very early morning, swimming off our heavy bellies and wine-fuddled heads in the slow rollers of the Indian Ocean, or basking in the sunlight.

That's what I did; just lay there on the sand, listening to a still pool-damp Li tell me what a great idea it was to blow the entire planet away (or suck the entire planet away). I listened to people

splashing in the waves, and tried to ignore Li. I dozed off, but I was woken up for a game of hide-and-seek in the rocks, and later we sat around and had a light picnic.

Later, Li had us all play another game; guess the generalisation. We each had to think of one word to describe humanity; Man, the species. Some people thought it was silly, just on principle, but the majority joined in. There were suggestions like 'precocious,' 'doomed,' 'murderous,' 'inhuman,' and 'frightening.' Most of us who'd been on-planet must have been falling under the spell of humanity's own propaganda, because we tended to come up with words like 'inquisitive,' 'ambitious,' 'aggressive,' or 'quick.' Li's own suggestion to describe humanity was, '*MINE!*', but then somebody thought to ask the ship. It complained about being restricted to one word, then pretended to think for a long time, and finally came up with; 'gullible.'

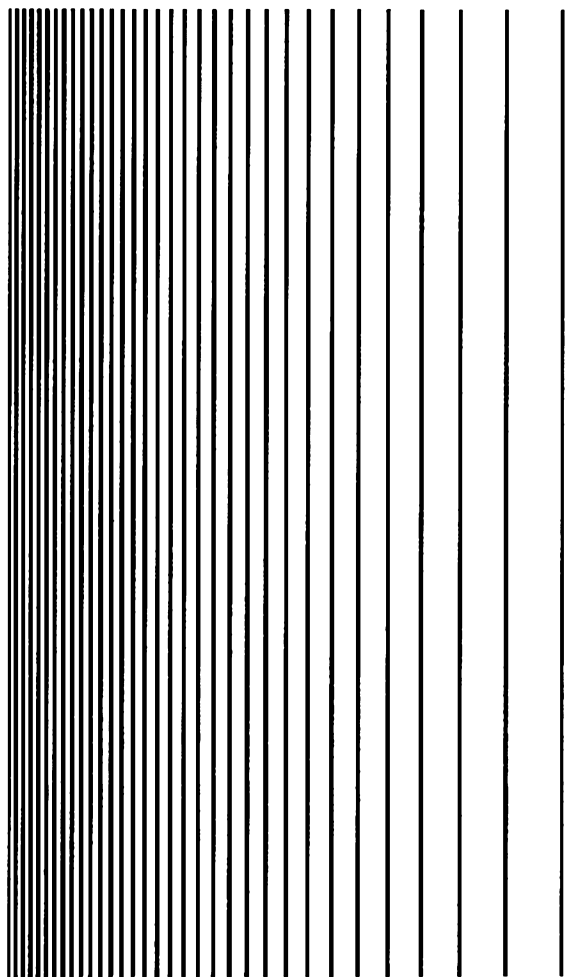
'Gullible?' I said.

'Yeah,' said the remote drone. 'Gullible ... and bigoted.'

'That's two words,' Li told it.

'I'm a fucking starship; I'm allowed to cheat.'

Well, it amused me. I lay back. The water sparkled, the sky seemed to ring with light, and way in the distance a black triangle or two carved the perimeter of the field the ship was laying down under the chopping blue sea.



6: Undesirable Alien

6.1: You'll Thank Me Later

December. We were finishing off, tying up the loose ends. There was an air of weariness about the ship. People seemed quieter. I don't think it was just tiredness, I think it was more likely the effect of a realised objectivity, a distancing; we had been there long enough to get over the initial buzz, the honeymoon of novelty and delight. We were starting to see Earth as a whole, not just as a job to be done and a playground to explore, and in looking at it that way, it became both less immediate and more impressive; part of the literature, something fixed by fact and reference, no longer ours; a droplet of knowledge already being absorbed within the swelling ocean of the Culture's experience.

Even Li had quieted down. He held his elections, but only a few people were indulgent enough to vote, and we just did it to humour him. Disappointed, Li declared himself the ship's captain in exile (no, I never understood that either), and left it at that. He took to betting against the ship on horse races, ball games and football matches. The ship must have been fixing the odds, because it ended up owing Li a ridiculous amount of money. Li insisted on being paid so the ship fashioned him a flawless cut diamond the size of his fist. It was his, the ship told him. A gift; he could own it. (Li lost interest in it after that though, and tended to leave it lying around the social spaces; I stubbed a toe on it at least twice. In the end he got the ship to leave the stone in orbit around Neptune on our way out of the system; a joke.)

I spent a lot of time on the ship playing *Tsartas* music, though more to compose myself than anything else.*

I had my Grand Tour, like most of the others on the ship, so spent a day or so in all the places I

* Sma uses a relatively equivalent play on words here. — 'The Drone'

wanted to see; I saw sunrise from the top of Khufu and sunset from Ayers Rock, I watched a pride of lions laze and play in Ngorongoro, and the tabular bergs calve from the Ross ice shelf; I watched condors in the Andes, musk ox on the tundra, polar bears on the Arctic ice and jaguars slinking through the jungle. I skated on Lake Baykal, dived over the Great Barrier Reef, strolled along the Great Wall, rowed across Dal and Titicaca, climbed mount Fuji, took a mule down the Grand Canyon, swam with the whales off Baja California, and hired a gondola to cruise round Venice, through the cold mists of winter under a sky that to me looked old and tired and worn.

I know some people did go to the ruins at Angkor, safety guaranteed by the ship, its drones and knife missiles ... but not I. No more could I visit the Potala, however much I wanted to.

We were due for a couple of months R&R on an Orbital in Trohoase cluster; standard procedure after immersion in a place like Earth. Certainly, I wasn't in the mood for any more exploring for a while; I was drained, sleeping five or six hours a night and dreaming heavily, as though the pressure of artificially crammed information I'd started out with as briefing — combined with everything I'd experienced personally — was too much for my poor head, and it was leaking out when my guard was down.

I'd given up on the ship. Earth was going to be a Control; I'd failed. Even the fall-back position, of waiting until Armageddon, was disallowed. I argued it out with the ship in a crew assembly, but couldn't even carry the human vote with me. The *Arbitrary* copied to the *Bad For Business* and the rest, but I think it was just being kind; nothing I said made any difference. So I made music, took my Grand Tour, and slept a lot.

I finished my Tour, and said goodbye to the Earth, on the cliffs of a chilly, wind-swept Thira, looking out over the shattered caldera to where the ruby

red sun met the Mediterranean; a livid plasma
island sinking in the wine-dark sea. Cried.

So I wasn't at all pleased when the ship asked me to
hit dirt for one last time.

'But I don't want to.'

'Well, that's all right, if you're quite sure. I'm not asking
you to do it for your own good, I must admit, but
I did promise Linter I'd ask, and he did seem
quite anxious to see you before we left.'

'Oh ... but *why*? What does he want from me?'

'He wouldn't say. I didn't talk to him all that long. I sent
a drone down to tell him we were leaving soon,
and he said he would only talk to you. I told him
I'd ask but I couldn't guarantee anything ... he
was adamant though; only you. He won't talk to
me. Oh well. Such is life. Not to worry. I'll tell him
you won't — ' the small unit started to drift away,
but I pulled it back.

'No; no, stop; I'll go. God dammit, I'll go. Where?
Where does he want to meet?'

'New York City.'

'Oh no.' I groaned.

'Hey, it's an interesting place. You might like it.'

6.2: The Precise Nature Of The Catastrophe

A General Contact Unit is a machine. In Contact you live inside one, or several, plus a variety of Systems Vehicles, for most of your average thirty year stint. I was just over half way through my spell and I'd been on three GCUs; the *Arbitrary* had been my home for only a year before we found Earth, but the craft before it had been an Escarpment class too. So I was used to living in a device ... nevertheless; I'd never felt so machine-trapped, so tangled and caught and snarled up as I did after an hour in the Big Apple.

I don't know if it was the traffic, the noise, the crowds, the soaring buildings or the starkly geometric expanses of streets and avenues (I mean, I've never even *heard* of a GSV which laid out its accommodation as regularly as Manhattan), or just everything together, but whatever it was, I didn't like it. So; a bitterly cold, windy Saturday night in the big city on the Eastern seaboard, only a couple of weeks' shopping left 'til Christmas, and me sitting in a little coffee shop on 42nd Street at eleven o'clock, waiting for the movies to end.

What was Linter playing at? Going to see *Close Encounters* for the seventh time, indeed.

I looked at my watch, drank my coffee, paid the check and left. I tightened the heavy wool coat about me, pulled on gloves and a hat. I wore needlecords and knee length leather boots. I looked around as I walked, a chill wind against my face.

What really got to me was the predictability. It was like a jungle. Oslo a rock garden? Paris a parterre, with its follies, shady areas and breeze-block garages inset? London with that vaguely conservatory air, a badly kept museum haphazardly modernised? Wien a too severe version of Paris, high starch collared, and Berlin a long garden party in the ruins of a

baroque sepulchre? Then New York a rain forest; an infested, towering, teeming jungle, full of great columns that scratched at the clouds but which stood with their feet in the rot, decay and swarming life beneath; steel on rock, glass blocking the sun; the ship's living machine incarnate.

I walked through the streets, dazzled and frightened. The *Arbitrary* was just a tap on my terminal away, ready to send help or bounce me up on an emergency displace, but I still felt scared. I'd never been in such an intimidating place. I walked up 42nd Street and carefully crossed Sixth Avenue to walk along its far side towards the movie theater.

People streamed out, talking in twos and groups, putting up collars, walking off quickly with their arms round each other to find someplace warm, or standing looking for a cab. Their breath misted the air in front of them, and from the lights of the mothership to the lights of the foyer to the lights of the snarling traffic they moved. Linter was one of the last out, looking thinner and paler than he had in Oslo, but brighter, quicker. He waved and came over to me, taking me in his arm, his hand on my elbow. He buttoned up a fawn-colored coat with his other hand, put his lips to my cheek as he reached for his gloves.

'Mmm. Hello. You're cold. Eaten yet? I'm hungry. Want to eat?'

'Hello. I'm not cold. I'm not really hungry either, but I'll come and watch you. How are you?'

'Fine. Fine,' he smiled.

He didn't look fine. He looked better than I remembered, but in big city terms he was a bit scruffy and not very well-fed looking. That fast, edgy, high-pressure urban life had infected him, I guess.

He pulled on my arm. 'Come on; let's walk. I want to talk.'

'All right.' We started along the sidewalk. Bustle-hustle, all their signs and lights and racket and smell, the white noise of their existence, a focus of all the

world's business. How could they stand it? The bag ladies; the obvious loonies, eyes staring; the grotesquely obese; the cold vomit in the alleys and the bloodstains on the kerb; and all their signs, those slogans and lights and pictures, flickering and bright, entreating and ordering, enticing and demanding in a grammar of glowing gas and incandescing wire.

This was the soul of the machine, the ethological epicentre, the planetary ground zero of their commercial energy. I could almost feel it, shivering down like bomb-blasted rivers of glass from these undreaming towers of dark and light invading the snow-dark sky.

Peace in the middle east? The papers asked. Better celebrate Bokassa's coronation instead; better footage.

'You got a terminal?' Linter said. He sounded eager somehow.

'Of course.'

'Turn it off?' He said. His eyebrows rose. He looked like a child all of a sudden. 'Please. I don't want the ship to overhear.'

I wanted to say something to the effect that the ship could have bugged every individual hair on his head, but didn't. I turned the terminal brooch to standby.

'You seen *Close Encounters*?' Linter said, leaning towards me. We were heading in the direction of Broadway.

I nodded. 'Ship showed us it being made. We saw the final print before anybody.'

'Oh yes, of course.' People bumped into us, swaddled in their heavy clothes, insulated. 'The ship said you're leaving soon. Are you glad to be going?'

'Yes, I am. I didn't think I'd be, but I am. And you? Are you glad to be staying?'

'Pardon?' A police car charged past, then another, sirens whooping. I repeated what I'd said. Linter nodded and smiled at me. I thought his breath smelled. 'Oh yes,' he nodded. 'Of course.'

'I still think you're a fool, you know. You'll be sorry.'

'Oh no, I don't think so.' He sounded confident, not looking at me, head held high as we walked down the street. 'I don't think so at all. I think I'm going to be very happy here.'

Happy here. In the grand, cold design and the fake warmth of the neon, while the drunks brown-bagged and the addicts begged and the deadbeats searched for warmer gratings and a thicker cardboard box. It seemed worse here; you saw the same thing in Paris and London, but it seemed worse here. Take a step from a shop you had to have an appointment for, swathed in loot across the sidewalk to the Roller, Merc or Caddy purring at the kerb, while some poor fucked-up husk of a human lay just a spit away, but you'd never notice them noticing... Or maybe I was just too sensitive, shell-shocked; life really was a struggle on Earth, and the Culture's 100% non-com. A year was as much as you could have expected any of us to handle, and I was near the end of my resistance.

'It'll all work out, Sma. I'm very confident.'

Fall in the street here and they just walk around you...

'Yes, yes, I'm sure you're right.'

'Look,' He stopped, turned me by the elbow so that we stood face to face, 'I'm going to have to tell you. I know you probably won't like me for it, but it's important to me.' I watched his eyes, shifting to look at each of mine in turn. His skin looked more mottled than I remembered; some pore-deep dirt.

'What?'

'I'm studying. I'm going to enter the Roman Catholic church. I've found Jesus, Diziet; I'm saved. Can you understand that? Are you angry with me? Does it upset you?'

'No, I'm not angry,' I said flatly. 'That's great, Dervley. If you're happy, I'm happy for you. Congratulations.'

'That's great!' He hugged me. I was pressed against his chest; held; released. We resumed our walk.

walking faster. He seemed pleased. 'Damn, I can't tell you Dizzy; it's just so good to be here, to be alive and know there are so many people, so much happening! I wake up in the morning and I have to lie for a while just convincing myself I'm really here and it's all really happening to me; I really do. I walk down the street and I look at the people; just look at them! A woman was killed in the place I stay in last week; can you imagine that? Nobody heard a thing. I go out and I go on buses and buy papers and watch old war movies in the afternoon. Yesterday I watched a man being talked down from the Queensboro bridge. I think people were disappointed. D'you know, when he came down he tried to claim he was a painter?' Linter shook his head, grinning. 'Hey, I read a terrible thing yesterday, you know? I read that there are times when there's a really complicated birth and the baby's caught inside the mother and probably already dead, and the doctor has to reach up inside the woman and take the baby's skull in his hand and crush it so they can save the mother. Isn't that terrible? I don't think I could have condoned that even before I found Jesus.'

'Why couldn't they have done a Caesarean?'

'I don't know. I don't know. I wondered about that myself. You know I was thinking about coming up to the ship?' He looked briefly at me, nodded. 'To see if anybody else might want to stay. I thought others might want to follow my example, especially after I'd talked to them, had a chance to explain. I thought they might see I was right.'

'Why didn't you?' We stopped at another intersection. All the people charged around us, hurrying through the smells of burned petrol and cooking and rotting food. I smelled gas, and sometimes steam wrapped itself around us, damp and fragrant.

'Why didn't I?' Linter mused, watching the DON'T WALK sign. 'I didn't think it would do any good. And I

was afraid the ship might find a way of keeping me on board. Do you think I was foolish?' I looked at him, while the steam curled round us and the sign changed to WALK, but I didn't say anything. An old guy came up to us on the far sidewalk and Linter gave him a quarter.

'But I'll be fine by myself anyway.' We turned down Broadway, heading towards Madison Square, past shops and offices, theaters and hotels, bars and restaurants and apartment blocks. Linter put his arm round my waist, squeezed me.

'Come on, Dizzy, you aren't saying much.'

'No, I'm not, am I?'

'I guess you still think I'm being stupid.'

'No more than the locals.'

He smiled. 'They're really good people. What you don't understand is you have to translate behaviour as well as language. Once you do realise that you'll come to love these people the way I do. Sometimes I think they've come to terms with their technology better than we have, you know that?'

'No.' No I didn't know that, here in mincerville, meat-grinder city. Come to terms with it; yeah sure ... turn off the aiming computer, Luke; play the five tones; close your eyes and concentrate together, that's the way ... nobody here but us Clears ... hand me down that orgone box...

'I'm not getting through to you, Dizzy, am I? You're all closed up, not really here. You're half way out the system already, aren't you?'

'I'm just tired,' I told him. 'Keep talking.' I felt like a helpless, twitching, pink-eyed rat caught in a maze in some shining alien laboratory; vast and glittering with some lethal, inhuman purpose.

'They do so well, considering. I know there's a lot of horrible things going on, but it only seems so terrible because we pay so much attention to it. The vast majority of good stuff isn't newsworthy; we don't notice it. We don't see what a good time most of these people are having. I've met a lot of quite happy people, you know; I have

friends. I met them through my work.'

'You work?' I was actually interested.

'Ha ha. I thought the ship might not have told you that. Yes, I've had a job for the last couple of months; document translator for a big firm of lawyers.'

'Uh-huh.'

'What was I saying? Oh yeah; lots of people have a quite acceptable life; they're pretty comfortable in fact. People can have neat apartments, cars, holidays ... and people can have children. *That's* a good thing, you know; you see a lot more children on a planet like this. I like children. Don't you?'

'Yes. I thought everybody did.'

'Ha, well ... anyway ... in some ways these people would consider us backward, you know that? I know it might sound dumb, but it isn't. Look at transport; the aircraft I had on my home plate was on its third or fourth generation, nearly a thousand years old! These people change their automobiles every year! They have throw-away containers and disposable clothes and fashions that mean changing your clothes every year; every season! —'

'Dervley —'

'Compared to them, the Culture moves at a snail's pace!'

'Dervley, what was it you wanted to talk about?'

'Huh? Talk about?' Linter looked confused. We turned left onto Fifth Avenue. 'Oh, nothing in particular, I guess. I just thought it'd be nice to see you before you left; wish you *bon voyage*. I hope you don't mind. You don't mind, do you? The ship said you might not want to come, but you don't mind, do you?'

'No, I don't mind.'

'Good. Good, I didn't think ...' his voice trailed off. We walked on in our own silence, in the midst of the city's continuous coughing and spitting and wheezing.

I wanted to go. I wanted to get out of this city and off this continent and up from this planet and onto

the ship and out of this system ... but something kept me walking with him, walking and stopping, stepping down and out, across and up, like another obedient part of the machine, designed to move, to function, to keep going regardless, to keep pressing on and plugging away, worming up or falling down but always always moving, down to the drug store or up to company president or just to stay a moving target, hugging the rails on a course you hardly needed to see so could stay blinkered on, missing the fallers and the lame around you and the trampled ones behind. Perhaps he was right and any one of us could stay here with him, just vanish into the city-space and disappear forever and never be thought of again, never think again, just obey orders and ordinances and do what the place demands, start falling and never stop, never find any other purchase, and our twistings and turnings and writhings as we fall, exactly what the city expects, just what the doctor ordered...

Linter stopped. He was looking through an iron grille at a shop selling religious statues, holy water containers, Bibles and commentaries, crosses and rosaries and crib and manger scenes. He stared down at it all, and I watched him. He nodded at the window display. 'That's what we've lost, you know. What you've lost; all of you. A sense of wonder and awe and ... sin. These people know there are still things they don't know, things that can still go wrong, things they can still do wrong. They still have the hope because the possibility is there. Without the possibility of failure, you can't have hope. They have hope. The Culture has statistics. We — it; the Culture — is too certain, too organised and stifled. We've choked the life out of life; nothing's left to chance. Take the chance of things going wrong out of life and it stops being life, don't you see?' His pinched, dark-browed face looked frustrated.

'No, I don't see,' I told him.

He ran one hand through his hair, shook his head.

'Look; let's eat, huh? I'm really hungry.'

'Okay; lead on. Where?'

'This way; somewhere really special.' We started off in the same direction again, came to the corner of 48th Street and turned up that. A cold wind blew around us, scattering papers. 'What I mean is, you have to have that potential for wrongness there or you can't live ... or you can but it doesn't *mean* anything. You can't have the peak without the trough, or light without shade ... it's not that you must have evil to have good, but you must have the possibility for evil. That's what the church teaches, you know. That's the choice that Man has; he can choose to be good or evil; God doesn't force him to be evil any more than He forces him to be good. The choice is left to Man now as it was to Adam. Only in God is there any real chance of understanding and appreciating Free Will.'

He pushed my elbow, steering me down an alley.

A white and red sign glowed at the far end.

I could smell food.

'You have to see that. The Culture gives us so much, but in fact it's only taking things away from us, lobotomizing everybody in it, taking away their choices, their potential for being really good or even slightly bad. But God, who is in all of us; yes, in you too, Diziet ... perhaps even in the ship for all I know... God, who sees and knows all, who is all-powerful, all-knowing, in a way that no ship, no mere Mind can ever be; *infinitely* knowing, still allows us; poor, pathetic, fallible humanity — and by extension, pan-humanity ... allows even us; the, the —'

It was dark in the alley, but I should still have seen

them. I wasn't even listening properly to Linter,

I was just letting him witter on, not concentrating.

So I should have seen them, but I didn't, not until it was too late.

They moved out from behind us, knocking over a

dustcan, shouting, crashing into us. Linter spun around, letting go of my elbow. I turned quickly. Linter held up one hand and said — did not shout — something I didn't catch. A figure rushed at me, half crouched. Somehow, without seeing it, I knew there was a knife.

It all remains so clear, so measured. I suppose some secretion had taken over the instant my mid-brain realised what was happening. It seemed very light in the alley, and everybody else was moving slowly, along lines like laser beams or crosshairs, casting weighted shadows in front of them along those lines in the direction they were moving.

I stepped to one side, letting the boy and the knife spin past. A right-foot trip and a little pressure on his wrist as he went by and he had to let the knife go. He stumbled and fell. I had the knife, and threw it far away down the alley before turning back to Linter.

Two of them had him on the ground, kicking and struggling. I heard him cry out once as I moved towards them, but I recall no other sound. Whether it was really as silent as I remember it, or whether I was simply concentrating on the sense that yielded the most information, I don't know. I caught the heels of one of them, and pulled, heaving him out and up, cracking his face against one boot where I'd stuck it out to meet him. I threw him out of the way. The other one was already up. Lines seemed to be bunching up at the side of my vision, and throbbing, making me think about how much time the first one had had to regain his balance if not his knife. I realised I wasn't doing this the way you were meant to. The one in front of me lunged. I stepped out of the way, turning again. I hit him on the head while I looked back at the first one, who was on his feet, coming forward, but hesitating at the side of the one I'd hit second, who was struggling up against the wall, holding his face; dark blood on pale skin.

They ran, as one, like a school of fish turning.
Linter was staggering, trying to stand. I caught him
and he clutched at me, gripping my arm tightly,
breath wheezing. He stumbled and sagged as
we got to the red and white light outside the little
restaurant. A man with a napkin stuffed in the top
of his vest opened the door and looked out at us.
Linter fell at the doorstep. It was only then I thought of
the terminal, and realised that Linter was
gripping the top of my coat, where the terminal
brooch was. The smells of cooking came out of
the open door. The man with the napkin looked
cautiously up and down the alley. I tried to prise
Linter's fingers free.

'No,' he said. 'No.'

'Dervley, let go. Let me get the ship.'

'No.' He shook his head. There was sweat on his
brow, blood on his lips. A huge dark stain was
spreading over the fawn coat. 'Let me.'

'What?'

'Lady?'

'No. Don't.'

'Lady? Want me to call the cops?'

'Linter? Linter?'

'Lady?'

'Linter!'

When his eyes closed his grip loosened.

There were more people at the restaurant door.

Somebody said, 'Jesus.' I stayed there,
kneeling on the cold ground with Linter's face
close to mine, thinking, How many films?

(The guns quieten, the battle stops.) How often
do they do this, in their commercial dreams?

(Look after Karen for me ... that's an order,
mister ... you know I always loved you ... Killing of
Georgie ... Ici resté un deporté inconnu ...)

What am I doing here? Come on lady.

'Come on lady. Come on, lady...' Somebody tried
to lift me.

Then he was lying beside Linter looking hurt and
surprised and somebody was screaming and
people were backing off.

I started running. I jabbed the terminal brooch and shouted.

I stopped at the far end of the alley, near the street, and rested against a wall, looking at the dark bricks opposite.

A noise like a pop, and a drone sinking slowly down in front of me; a business-like black-body drone, the inky lengths of two knife missiles hovering on either side above eye level, twitchy for action.

I took a deep breath. 'There's been a slight accident,' I said calmly.

6.3: Halation Effect

I looked at Earth. It was shown, in-holo'd, on one wall of my cabin; brilliant and blue, solid and white-whorled.

'Then it was more like suicide,' Tagm said, stretching out on my bed. 'I didn't think catholics — '

'But I cooperated,' I said, still pacing up and down. 'I let him do it. I could have called the ship. After he lost consciousness there was time; we could still have saved him.'

'But he'd been altered back, Dizzy, and they're dead when their heart stops, aren't they?'

'No; there's two or three minutes after the heart stops. It was enough time. I had enough time.'

'Well then so did the ship. It *must* have been watching; it was bound to have had a missile on the case.' Tagm snorted. 'Linter was probably the most over-observed man on the planet. The ship must have known too; it could have done something. The ship had the control, it had the real-time grasp; it isn't your responsibility, Dizzy.'

I wished I could accept Tagm's moral subtraction. I sat down on the end of the bed, head in my hands, staring at the holo of the planet in the wall. Tagm came over, hugged me, hands on my shoulders, head on mine. 'Dizzy; you have to stop thinking about it. Let's go do something. You can't sit watching that damn holo all day.'

I stroked one of Tagm's hands, gazed again at the slowly revolving planet, my gaze flicking in one glance from pole to equator. 'You know, when I was in Paris, seeing Linter for the first time, I was standing at the top of some steps in the courtyard where Linter's place was, and I looked across it and there was a photographer's studio on the far side, and there was a little notice on the wall saying it was forbidden to take photographs of the courtyard without the man's permission.' I turned to Tagm. 'They want to own the light!'

6.4: Dramatic Exit or Thankyou And Goodnight

At five minutes and three seconds past three AM, GMT, on the morning of January the second, 1978, the General Contact Unit *Arbitrary* broke orbit above the planet Earth. It left behind an octet of Main Observation Satellites — six of them in near-GS orbits — a scattering of drones and minor missiles, and a small plantation of young oaks on a bluff near Elk Creek, California. The ship had brought Linter's body back up, displacing it from its freezer in a New York City morgue. But when we left, Linter stayed, in a fashion. I argued he ought to be buried on-planet, but the ship disagreed. Linter's last instructions regarding the disposal of his remains had been issued fifteen years earlier, when he first joined Contact, and were quite conventional; his corpse was to be displaced into the centre of the nearest star. So the sun gained a body-weight, courtesy of Culture tradition, and in a million years, maybe, a little of the light from Linter's body would shine upon the planet he had loved.

The *Arbitrary* held its darkfield for a few minutes, then dropped it just past Mars (so there was just a chance it left an image on an Earth telescope). Meanwhile it was snapping all its various remote drones and sats away from the other planets in the system. It stayed in real space right up till the last moment (making it possible that its rapidly increasing mass produced a blip on a terrestrial gravity-wave experiment, deep in some mountain-mine), then totalled as it dispatched Linter's body into the stellar core, sucked a last few drones off Pluto and a couple of outlying comets, and slung Li's diamond at Neptune (where it's probably still in orbit).

I'd decided to leave the *Arbitrary* after the R&R, but after I'd relaxed on Svanrayt Orbital for a few

weeks I changed my mind. I had too many friends on the ship, and anyway it seemed genuinely upset when it found out I was thinking of transferring. It charmed me into staying. But it never did tell me whether it had been watching Linter and me that night in New York.

So, did I really believe I was to blame, or was I kidding even myself? I don't know. I didn't know then, and I don't know now.

There was guilt, I recall, but it was an odd sort of guilt. What really annoyed me, what I did find hard to take, was my complicity not in what Linter was trying to do, and not in his own half-willed death, but in the generality of transferred myth those people accepted as reality.

It strikes me that although we occasionally carp about Having To Suffer, and moan about never producing *real* Art, and become despondent or try too hard to compensate, we are indulging in our usual trick of synthesising something to worry about, and should really be thanking ourselves that we live the life we do. We may think ourselves parasites, complain about Mind-generated tales, and long for 'genuine' feelings, 'real' emotion, but we are missing the point, and indeed making a work of art ourselves in imagining such an uncomplicated existence is even possible. We have the best of it. The alternative is something like Earth, where as much as they suffer, for all that they burn with pain and confused, bewildered *angst*, they produce more dross than anything else; soap operas and quiz programmes, junk papers and pulp romances.

Worse than that, there is an osmosis from fiction to reality, a constant contamination which distorts the truth behind both and fuzzes the telling distinctions in life itself, categorising real situations and feelings by a set of rules largely culled from the most hoary fictional clichés, the most familiar and received nonsense. Hence the soap operas, and those who try to live their lives as soap operas, while believing the stories to be

true; hence the quizzes where the ideal is to think as close to the mean as possible, and the one who conforms utterly is the one who stands above the rest; the Winner...

They always had too many stories, I believe; they were too free with their acclaim and their loyalty, too easily impressed by simple strength or a cunning word. They worshipped at too many altars.

Well, there's your story.

Perhaps it's as well I haven't changed very much over the years; I doubt that it's much different from what I'd have written a year or a decade later, rather than a century.*

It's funny the images that stay with you though.

Over the years one thing has haunted me, one dream recurred. It really has nothing to do with me in a sense, because it was something I never saw ... yet it stays there, nevertheless.

I didn't want to be displaced, that night, nor did I want to travel out to somewhere remote enough for a module to pick me up without being seen.

I got the black-body drone to lift me from the city; right up, darkfielded, into the sky in the midst of Manhattan, rising above all that light and noise into the darkness, quiet as any falling feather. I sat on the Drone's back, still in shock I suppose, and don't even remember transferring to the dark module a few kilometres above the grid of urban light. I saw but didn't watch, and thought not of my own flight, but about the other drones the ship might be using on the planet at the time; where they might be, what doing.

I mentioned the *Arbitrary* collected snow flakes.

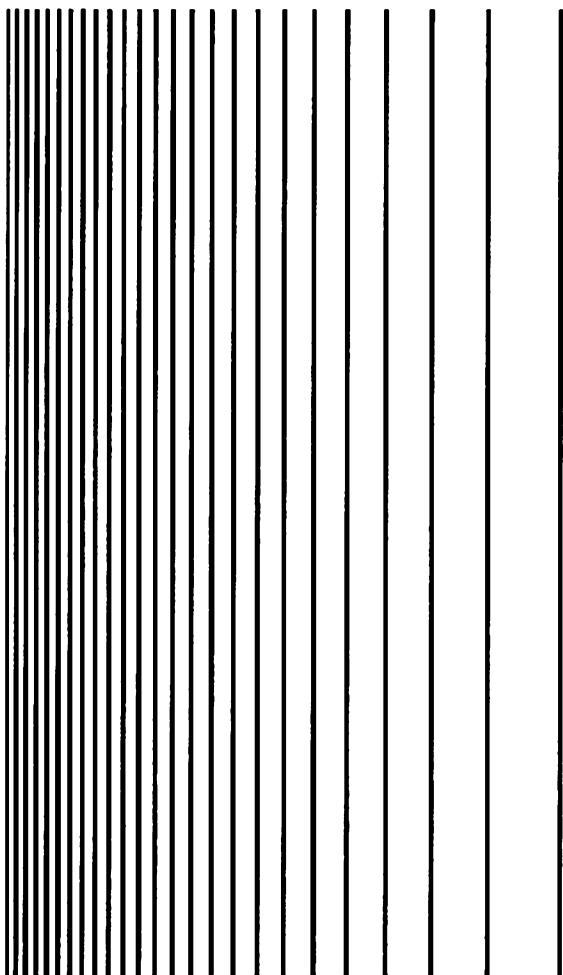
Actually it was searching for a pair of identical ice crystals. It had — has — a collection; not holos or figure break-downs, but actual samples

* Ha! — 'The Drone'

of ice crystals from every part of the galaxy it
has ever visited where it found frozen water.
It only ever collects a few flakes each time,
of course; a saturation pick up would be ...
inelegant.

I suppose it must still be looking. What it will do if it ever
does find two identical crystals, it has never said.
I don't know that it really wants to find them,
anyway.

But I thought of that, as I left the glittering, grumbling
city beneath me. I thought — and I still dream
about this, maybe once or twice a year — of
some drone, its flat back star-dappled, quietly in
the steppes or at the edge of a polynya off
Antarctica, gently lifting a single flake of snow,
teasing it away from the rest, and hesitating
perhaps, before going, displaced or rising,
taking its tiny, perfect cargo to the orbiting
starship, and leaving the frozen plains, or the
waste of ice, once more at peace.



**7: Perfidy, *Or*, A Few Words From
'The Drone' (sic)**

Well, thank goodness *that's* over. I don't mind telling you this has been an extremely difficult translation, not helped at all by Sma's intransigent and at times obstructive attitude. She frequently used Marain expressions it would be impossible to render accurately into English without at least a three-dimensional diagram, and consistently refused to redraft or revise the text to facilitate its translation. I have done my best, but I can take no responsibility for any misunderstanding caused by any part of this communication.

I suppose I had better note here that the chapter titles (including that for Sma's covering letter, and this) and sub-titles are my own additions. Sma wrote the above as one continuous document (can you imagine?!), but I thought it better to split the thing up. The chapter titles and sub-titles are, incidentally, also all names of General Contact Units produced by the *Infracaninophile* manufactory in Yinang Orbital which Sma refers to (without naming) in Chapter Three.

Another thing; you will notice that Sma has the gall to refer to me simply as 'The Drone' in her letter. I have humoured her matronising whim quite long enough, and now wish to make clear that my name is, in fact, Fohristiwhirl Skaffen-Amtiskaw Handrahen Dran Easpyou. I am not self-important and it is irresponsible of Sma to suggest that my duties in Special Circumstances are some sort of atonement for past misdeeds. My conscience is clear.

Skaffen-Amtiskaw.
(Drone, Offensive)

PS: I have met the *Arbitrary*, and it is a much more pleasant and engaging machine than Sma would have you believe.

The results are unpredictable, stimulating, and irresistible. Softening the blows of home truths and otherwise-disheartening insights with his relentless wit and engaging dialogue, this is one of those extremely rare and wonderful books which leaves its readers charmed and changed, with much to ponder and even more to savor. *The State of the Art* is the story of a man in love with life itself. It is also a brave investigation into the nature of good and evil, a questing demand for reason in the face of the irrational. Driven by a compelling narrative force, it is hard to put down and harder still to forget. More than simply a delightful escapist device, it is also an important reflective contemplation on the nature of life and modern living.

Iain M. Banks lives and writes in his native Scotland, where he currently makes his home in Edinburgh. His other books include:

	<i>The Wasp Factory</i>
<i>Walking on Glass</i>	
	<i>The Bridge</i>
<i>Consider Phlebas</i>	
	<i>Espedair Street</i>
<i>The Player of Games</i>	

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Banks

THE STATE OF THE ART



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